

Closure of care facilities draws protests

Patrick's plan would shut down 4 institutions for people with developmental disabilities

By Matt Murphy, Eagle Boston Bureau

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BOSTON — Diagnosed with Type I diabetes, autism and severe developmental disabilities, 23-year-old Michael Feeley requires around-the-clock care.

For now, Michael's mother, Patricia, cares for her son in their Westford home. But she knows she won't be able to be there forever.

"I do it, but I'm not going to live to be 200. He's ready to have his own life, too. What 23-year-old do you know that always wants to hang around with his mother?" Feeley said.

The Feeleys joined dozens of families, care providers and health advocates at the Statehouse yesterday to protest Gov. Deval L. Patrick's plan to close four of the state's six residential institutions for people with developmental disabilities.

'One size does not fit all'

The closures include the Fernald Developmental Center in Waltham, the oldest publicly funded facility for people with developmental disabilities, along with the Glavin Regional Center in Shrewsbury, the Monson Developmental Center in Palmer and the Templeton Developmental Center in Baldwinville.

"One size does not fit all," said David Hart, president of the Coalition of Families and Advocates for the Retarded.

The Supreme Court on Monday decided not to hear a case brought by supporters of the Fernald Center seeking to prevent its closure. Former Gov. Mitt Romney was the first to propose closing Fernald as Massachusetts came to operate six of the last seven residential institutions in New England.

Patricia Feeley has been trying to get Michael accepted at either the Glavin Center or the New England Village in Pembroke since he became eligible for residential care last May.

'Changed their philosophy'

"The stumbling block appears to be that he requires 24/7 nursing care," Feeley said.

"They just don't want you because they've changed their philosophy."

Patrick has proposed moving about 316 people living in those four facilities to community group homes or one of the two remaining centers. The administration argues the change will help integrate residents into the greater community and free up resources to better serve the state's other 32,000 clients who receive community-based services.

The Arc of Massachusetts, the state's largest advocacy group for people with developmental disabilities, supports the governor's strategy.

"Now, those at Fernald and other state institutions will have an opportunity to live in the community," said Leo Sarkissian, executive director of Arc.

The group says research on the health of patients supports the transition away from institutions to smaller, community-based settings.

The administration estimates about \$13 million in first-year savings and \$40 million annually after fiscal 2010. Legislative leaders, however, are starting to wonder whether the plan will generate any savings at all as the state invests in new, community-based services over the next four years. Disability advocates say they also worry whether patients will receive the same level of care in smaller community homes and argue that it is not in the best interest of families to be forced to move.

Legislators at the event criticized the Patrick administration for moving forward with the plan to close the facilities without debating the policy change with the Legislature.

Rep. Karyn Polito, R-Shrewsbury, said she would push for language in next year's budget calling for a two-year feasibility study. She said admissions to the state's six centers should continue until that study is complete.

"Community first is just words, it's just a title. It doesn't mean equal or better for you and your families," Polito told the crowd.