

SOUTHTOWNSTAR

Report critical of Howe care, management

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By Carole Sharwarko, Staff writer

After a two-year investigation, a coalition of disability advocate groups today is releasing a review alleging abysmal conditions and management at Howe Developmental Center in Tinley Park.

The beleaguered residential facility for patients with a range of developmental disabilities has been hounded by critics in recent years and lost its federal certification in March 2007.

And according to the coalition of nonprofit groups, those in charge of Howe have done little to clean up their act since.

"This issue has been going on for so long, the coalition decided someone had to work to bring to light these horrible conditions," said Mark Karner, director of advocacy for the Progress Center, a nonprofit service and advocacy organization run by people with disabilities.

Karner's group is part of the coalition releasing the review at 11 a.m. today at the Tinley Park American Legion Post 615, 17423 S. 64th Court.

The report claims Howe staff repeatedly offered "very bad care" for its more than 400 residents. Claims include "using restraints when it is dangerous to do so" and "failing to adequately respond to pain," but also reflect much more serious issues such as "failing to initiate CPR" and "falsifying physician documentation."

In March 2007, the U.S. Center for Medicaid Services cited multiple problems with resident care at Howe, and pulled federal funding. In August 2007, the Department of Justice launched an investigation that is ongoing.

Equip for Equality looked into conditions at the facility as well. That independent nonprofit group is charged by the federal government with protecting and advocating for people with mental and physical disabilities in Illinois.

"We have the authority to visit institutions like Howe unannounced," said Zena Naiditch, president of the group.

"In response to information about people who have died, to agency reports and to complaints we've received, we completed 35 site visits to Howe over the last two years and spent hundreds of hours in observation and record reviews."

Though she said review teams did not witness any abuse firsthand, they found other troubling situations: A patient flinched as a staff member approached. Residents sat, watching TV, rather than engaged in programs. Severe bruises couldn't be explained on someone who supposedly receives 24-hour supervision.

Bad grades across the board

The report card is the culmination of the group's reviews. It gives Howe Center failing grades in four categories: quality of service, ensuring civil rights, maximizing federal dollars and effective use of taxpayers' dollars.

Most shockingly, Naiditch said, are the number of suspicious deaths that occur at Howe. Investigations of 20 of those deaths documented "many instances of terrible care," the report says.

"They brought in an entirely new leadership to regain Medicaid certification, and they couldn't even do it," Naiditch said. "So now they have new leadership again. How can we allow people to live in a place that can't meet minimum Medicaid standards?"

The center has gone through three directors since September 2003. Calls to Howe Center's new interim director, Joe Turner, were referred to the Illinois Department of Health Services.

Department spokesperson Tom Green said Turner took over a few months ago when interim director Arthur Holmberg left after he failed to turn the institution around.

"We recognize there are many challenges facing Howe, and the other eight Illinois institutions like it," Green said. "We're looking to improve the quality of care at all of them."

Green said Thursday he had not seen the report and couldn't comment on it. He offered no specifics on how the department planned to improve care, but said over the past two years it has transferred almost 300 Illinois institutional residents into community care.

Those transfers, though, were not in response to neglect allegations, Green said, but actions that would have been taken otherwise.

Equip for Equality and its partner organizations want to see Howe and the other eight institutions like it closed altogether. Karner said community-based living greatly improves the lives of disabled people, offering them better care, more comfortable conditions and connections with the outside world.

"These institutions are like being in a prison," he said. "You're told when to get up, when to eat, limited on what you can do. It's a violation of their civil rights to live in such a restrictive environment."

Green said some people want facilities such as Howe to stay open. Residents' families are informed of their options and keep loved ones there by choice.

But Karner said fear drives this decision. When a patient has only lived in one place for 15 or 20 years, they and their family are afraid of change. Naiditch said many had bad experiences in community environments. Illinois' large institutions suck funding away from smaller providers, rendering them undesirable, she said.

Since the government yanked its \$30.5 million in funding, Illinois has solely footed Howe's bill - \$61 million annually. Green said Turner will attempt a unit-by-unit recertification beginning this fall.

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