

## How bad is Howe?

May 31, 2008

By Carole Sharwarko, staff writer

Disability advocacy groups clashed Friday with family members of residents at Howe Developmental Center about the institution's fate.

A coalition of disability organizations, led by Equip for Equality, hosted a press conference where they presented a scathing report card for Howe, a state residential care facility in Tinley Park. The report detailed abuse and neglect suffered by residents, who have a wide range of developmental disabilities. The groups want Howe shuttered and its residents moved to community living.

Equip for Equality president Zena Naiditch reminded the crowd that Howe's federal funding was revoked after it failed to meet minimum standards. She recounted the grisly story of a blind, mentally disabled and mute woman with heart disease.

"She usually received anti-anxiety medication before medical procedures," Naiditch said. "But one day she had an unscheduled pap smear without medication. When she became very upset and began thrashing around, staff held down her arms and legs while the doctor conducted the pap smear. Within an hour, she collapsed and died."

Because of ongoing problems and the failure of rotating administrations at the center to bring change, Naiditch said Howe is beyond repair.

But representatives from the Howe Friends and Family Association who attended the press conference said the center serves their family members well. They admit it has problems but balked at closure as the only option.

"Howe is not perfect, but I have not seen the abuses you talk about," said Linda Brown, of North Aurora, whose daughter has lived at Howe for 19 years. "My daughter receives care 24 hours a day, seven days a week."

Brown and other residents' family members said community settings - in which small groups of disabled people live with assistance in neighborhoods - are lacking, and not always better options.

"I don't want to lose what I have on the chance that in five years there will be a better place for my daughter," Brown said.

Howe Family and Friends Association president Betty Turturillo, of Tinley Park, said she thinks the advocacy groups are exaggerating the situation at Howe to better make their point.

Equip for Equality abuse investigator Deborah Kennedy said Howe staffers might offer better treatment to residents whose family visits often. Turturillo said she sees no evidence of that.

"We've got some wonderful staff at Howe, and some who aren't as good," Turturillo said. "I don't think the people without family are treated any differently."

Kennedy said residents may be reluctant to voice dissent while they still live at Howe, fearing retaliation.

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