

Coalition repeats call to close Howe

Play highlights deadly conditions

July 30, 2008

By Kristen Schorsch, Staff writer

The play was called "21," named for the number of people who have died at the Howe Developmental Center in Tinley Park in the past three years.

A costume-clad grim reaper poked a scythe at 21 headstones against the backdrop of the Thompson Center in downtown Chicago as a group of actors portrayed the deplorable conditions at Howe, a state-run cluster of homes along 183rd Street between Harlem and 80th avenues where about 322 people live.



A grim reaper watches over 21 headstones during a play protesting conditions at the Howe Developmental Center in Tinley Park. Organizers, who are calling for the state to close Howe, say three more people have died there in the last three months, bringing the death toll to 24.



A group that wants the Howe Developmental Center in Tinley Park closed says 24 people have died at the center.
(Kristen Schorsch/SouthtownStar)

About 70 people gathered to watch the performance, then gasped when they learned the death toll has risen to 24.

Three more people have died - including one death discovered last week and two in the past three months - since Decatur resident Amy Walker, 28, wrote the play about Howe, said Deborah Kennedy, Equip for Equality abuse investigation unit director. The federally mandated watchdog group for people with physical and mental disabilities arrives unannounced at Howe and inspects it every other week. Tom Green, spokesman for the Illinois Department of Human Services, said he could not discuss the deaths because of patient confidentiality.

On Tuesday, the Community For All Coalition, a network of disability organizations that supports community-based living for people with disabilities, once again called for Gov. Rod Blagojevich to close Howe before more residents die.

In the play, a Howe resident learns her friend died after staff held her down during a medical exam. Then the resident chokes on her lunch and dies alone when a staff member leaves her because she said she doesn't have time to chat.

Lilia Teninty, director of the state Department of Human Services division of developmental disabilities, said the state continues to transition clients from Howe into community-based settings and plans to continue the trend.

"Our goal is to create an improved system of supports for people with developmental disabilities in Illinois, one that is centered around the needs of the individuals who receive services and their families," Teninty said in an e-mail. "Improving the quality of care for people who live at Howe Developmental Center remains a top priority."

DHS spokesman Green has said the state has moved 68 people into community-based homes in the last two years.

In May, the Community For All Coalition released a stinging report card full of F's that outlined poor care and wasteful use of taxpayer dollars spent on Howe. Residents have been left in urine-soaked clothes and staff members have failed to initiate CPR and falsified physician documentation, the coalition said.

The federal government striped Howe of \$30 million last year in federal dollars after the center did not properly care for residents. The center houses about 322 adults with developmental disabilities on a sprawling 600-acre campus along 183rd Street. The center shares land with the Tinley Park Mental Health Center, which has 73 patients.

The coalition wants the state to spend the money it uses to operate Howe on community-based homes. Zena Naiditch, Equip for Equality CEO and president, estimates the state pays about \$140,000 annually for a person to live at Howe. It would cost about \$40,000 a year for a resident to live in a community-based home, she said. Green said he wouldn't dispute those numbers.

The coalition also wants to meet with a DHS representative within 30 days to talk about Howe. The group then wants to meet quarterly for updates.

"We're speaking for the people whose voices cannot be heard," Naiditch said.

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