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Howe Center in Tinley to close by spring

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[BY AMY LEE](#)

Longstanding allegations of abuse and neglect and the loss of millions in Medicaid funding have led the state to shutter the Howe Developmental Center in Tinley Park.

Gov. Pat Quinn on Friday announced he plans to close the struggling Howe and relocate its 251 disabled residents by spring of next year. His order comes about a year after former Gov. Rod Blagojevich also recommended closing the facility, and more than two years after nonprofit advocacy group Equip for Equality also called for its closure.

Regardless, the decision sent families and guardians of residents reeling and scrambling to find new homes for their wards and loved ones.

"They pulled the rug out from under everyone," said Betty Turturillo, whose disabled daughter Angela, 57, has lived at Howe since 1974. "I'm very unhappy with the people in the state. They're not thinking about people being ripped out of the home they've lived in for so many years. They're looking at an agenda and finances."

The Illinois Department of Public Health and the federal Centers for Medicaid Services in April 2007 decertified Howe after investigations found abuse and neglect at the facility contributed to the deaths of 31 residents in four years. Decertification meant the facility was unable to bill Medicaid and lost \$26 million in federal funding each year.

The state has spent about \$150 million since then to keep Howe operating, said Tom Green, spokesman for the state's Department of Human Services. The state has budgeted \$47 million through 2010 to fund Howe, and \$15.7 million of that is set aside to pay relocation expenses for its residents, he said.

Moving away

"There will be a thoughtful transition that will take into account the needs of each individual and their families to ensure quality services in a smaller, home-like setting," Green said. "The goal is to reflect the growing trend of community services as opposed to institutional settings. That's something the state wants to move toward in the future."

Quinn in May commissioned Anne Shannon, former president and CEO of Aspire, to examine operations at Howe. Shannon met with more than 60 families of current and former Howe residents during her two-month review and recommended the facility close in a report made public on Friday.

Equip for Equality, which has been monitoring the problems at Howe for more than two years, praised Quinn's move as long overdue. They maintain the abuse and neglect problems continued despite numerous attempts to improve the facility.

"The pattern and trend of the problems at Howe were longstanding and extremely serious, and it really does stand out for its lapses in care and treatment," said Zena Naiditch, president and CEO of Equip for Equality. "You saw the culture there just could not go through a radical change and without radical change, people are unsafe. You can't use public money in unsafe facilities."

Quinn made an unannounced visit to the 35-year-old facility on August 15, but did not issue a report on his findings. The state's Commission on Government Forecasting and Accountability in April voted 9 to 3 to close the facility.

"There has been an inability to correct some of the issues that led to decertification," Green said. "The bigger picture issue is to downsize institutions in the state and move people into community-based settings."

A transition team, made up of staff from the state Department of Human Services, Howe staffers, family members and guardians, are available to help families and guardians find new, qualified homes for the residents.

Union blasts management

Howe's closure will eliminate the jobs of 694 - 630 of whom belong to AFSCME Council 31. AFSCME has long

argued new management and more qualified staff could help to restore Howe's federal certification.

"Pat Quinn had a chance to clean up the Blagojevich administration's mess. Gov. Quinn should have immediately fired the managers who neglected the facility and begun to reverse steep cuts to its staff - the keys to regaining the federal certification the Howe center held since 1974," AFSCME 31 Council executive director Henry Bayer said in a written statement.

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