

SOUTHTOWNSTAR

Howe closing is long overdue

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Editorial

THE ISSUE: The state plans to close the Howe Developmental Center in Tinley Park and relocate residents to small community homes or to larger, less problem-plagued institutions. It also will replace the Tinley Park Mental Health Center with a new 100-bed public-private psychiatric hospital, and sell the land on which both sit.

WE SAY: This has been a long time coming, and we welcome both plans. The track records of these facilities have been mediocre at best, and we think residents will be better served in new settings.

Twenty-six deaths and a loss of more than \$27 million in federal money: That's the toll taken by Tinley Park's Howe Developmental Center in terms of human life and the state's bottom line over the last three years.

It's a steep price to pay for a state facility that's been plagued with problems for far longer than the point at which it was decertified last year.

So, while it's been long overdue, we applaud the Illinois Department of Human Services for finally doing the right thing and closing Howe. The 316 or so residents will be moved into small community-based homes or into more traditional institutional facilities for developmentally disabled people. As each goes into a new home, the federal money that accompanies someone living in a certified residence will be restored.

We know this closure plan comes as a blow to families whose loved ones have lived at Howe for the bulk of their adult lives and who believe the current arrangement is working well. But we are sincere in our belief that there must be something better than Howe. We do not exaggerate when we say we fear for the lives of those who are there.

Because of that, we have to put our faith in human services administrators, who promise work with families in coming up with relocation plans that are palatable to all involved. The goal is to have everyone in new residences by July 2009.

To a certain extent, it's blind faith as the state's track record is not great and because it's never been particularly clear to us why this facility was so plagued with problems in the first place. Despite the replacement of the top administration several times over and the millions poured into Howe over the years, it's been decertified twice. Among other things, state officials blame a constantly changing list of about 400 federal regulations (which other facilities seem able to deal with), but don't really answer why they've been so slow in embracing the small community homes concept that is the norm in many states. Advocates say it's not only more successful, but it's far less expensive.

So here's a chance for state officials to do things right, and prove they can be empathetic, organized, efficient and fair in carrying out this sensitive plan.

The state also plans to close the Tinley Park Mental Health Center, which shares a location with Howe. Local patients requiring treatment will be sent to new units being built at two existing Chicago-area facilities while a new 100-bed "center of excellence" (state speak for state-of-the-art psychiatric hospital) is built.

Again, this is a welcome announcement as this place, too, lost its certification last year (although it's since been reinstated). And again, we take a leap of faith that officials will follow through on promises, including that the new hospital - an innovative private-public venture that will rely on private, contractual medical care - will be built somewhere in the south suburbs. Given that the hospital also serves all of Will, Grundy and Kankakee counties, and will be built on state-owned land, that's a big "if."

All in all, though, this is an attractive plan. It frees up about 600 acres of prime Tinley Park real estate off Harlem Avenue near Interstate 80 for development. Sale proceeds will fund the new hospital and, depending on who purchases the land, it should go back on local property tax rolls. If stores are built, new sales tax will be generated.

All involved presumably will emerge winners, particularly Howe residents, whom we hope will thrive in smaller, home-like settings. This is our greatest hope. The state's track record may not be great on things like this - OK, it's pretty abysmal - but here's a terrific chance to get things right.