

## Groups urge closing of disabled-care facility

By Joel Hood | Tribune reporter

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For three years, disabled-care advocates have called attention to what they call neglect and improper care of residents at the Howe Developmental Center in Tinley Park. On Friday, advocates brought new allegations against the state-run facility and urged Gov. Rod Blagojevich to shut it down.

"This is about a place . . . that gets less regulation than an animal shelter," Derrick Dufresne, director of the Institute on Public Policy for People with Disabilities, said at an emotionally charged two-hour news conference. "This isn't about money. This is not about resources. This is about a place being unfixable."

The non-profit group Equip for Equality, which runs a federally mandated advocacy program for disabled-care facilities, has investigated 21 deaths at Howe since 2005 that it says demonstrate "grossly substandard care" by staff and the center's leadership.

The cases included a man who reportedly was dead in a wheelchair for more than an hour before anyone noticed; a woman who died within hours of a Pap smear during which she was restrained, and a young man who claimed as many as 50 instances of abuse at the center despite being assigned round-the-clock supervision.

Zena Naiditch, president and chief executive of Equip for Equality, said her agency's investigations revealed other problems: insufficient food and drink; incomplete and, in some cases, falsified medical records; restraints used improperly; a lack of structured, organized activities; and failure to report instances of neglect or abuse to the state inspector general.

Last year, the Department of Justice launched an investigation into Howe after similar allegations came to light. In March 2007, the federal government rescinded Howe's Medicaid certification, stripping the center of nearly \$30 million in funding. A 93-page report by the Illinois Department of Human Services that month confirmed many of the advocacy groups' findings.

But rather than close a 324-patient facility that employs about 750 people, the state chose to offset the federal cuts and now contributes about \$60 million a year to keep it open.

Naiditch urged the state to pull its funding from Howe and invest in smaller, community-based alternatives.

Some families of residents accuse Naiditch and others of exaggerating the center's

deficiencies. A flawed facility is better than none at all, they say.

"Howe is not perfect, but I have not seen the abuses you're talking about," Linda Brown, mother of a 45-year-old living at Howe, said at the news conference. "My daughter takes the bus on trips and has 24-hour care, seven days a week."

Human Services department spokesman Tom Green acknowledged the need to improve Howe and said the state regularly meets with advocacy groups to discuss their recommendations.

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