

Connecticut State Report

By Hugo Dwyer, Diana Mennone, and Marty Dwyer

Connecticut continues to have severe budget constraints. Its debt crisis has gotten worse over that past few years, and desperate measures are being considered in every aspect of state income and expenses. A concerted effort is underway to close facilities operated by the state's Department of Developmental Services (DDS), despite objections of the families with loved ones living there. This movement focuses on ending CT's state-operated system and relying only on private sector providers for the state's safety net. The plan to close (DDS) Public Facilities held its first formal meeting May 18, 2016.

As has been the case in many states where closing large facilities has become an obsession despite their being no responsible and orderly plan for its execution, Connecticut's private providers do not have enough ICF level facilities and do not have anywhere near enough available beds or housing to appropriately accommodate the large number of individuals who would be relocated should the proposals of closure be enacted. In addition, the private providers will not pay the same salaries as the state system, which hired union members. The direct-support professionals who have been working with our population for decades will be cast out of the system, replaced with new workers with arguably less training and no familiarity with the specific needs of their clients. While CT's private providers say they would be pleased to meet the needs of these individuals, the concern remains that quality of care and safety will not meet the same standards. Last year, the Inspector General of HHS reported that CT was not in compliance with requirements for reporting critical incidents involving persons with I/DD in its group homes.

In spite of this, CT has planned converting 30 of its state-operated group homes to being owned and operated by the private sector, leaving only 21 DDS homes. This would result in 450 DDS staff lay-offs. The conversion is on-going, but slow. The Union stepped in with an injunction to stop disclosure info to private providers, and to reverse Union language in contract regarding lay-offs. Conversion projects on hold awaiting outcome of injunction request by Union and direction from Central Office.

The State also closed two of its five state-run regional centers last year, moving most of the residents into HCBS-waiver settings, despite objections of the families involved.

There have also been notable changes in the hierarchy of the state's Department of Developmental Services (DDS). Late last year, Commissioner Morna Murray was on leave for several months. Jordan Scheff was named Acting DDS Commissioner in January of 2017, then Commissioner on April 21st.

Connecticut had been one of the last states to have a state-funded and operated P&A. Last summer, it was suddenly announced that that agency would be closed, and replaced with a privately run P&A like most other states. At a hearing in Hartford, members of the Deaf community, the Blind community, families of persons in state-operated facilities, and other members of the disabled community showed outrage at having been left out of any discussion or notification of this decision. Only members of the Arc and its affiliates seemed

to have been aware of and welcoming toward this change. The state's Office of Protection and Advocacy for Persons with Disabilities (OPAPD) will be replaced by the new agency, Disability Rights Connecticut (DRCT).

Southbury Training School is still the state's largest ICF/IID. In the last year, the population dropped from 261 to 226 residents. Two residential units are being closed, along with one small unit for two. Most of these individuals will transfer to other cottages on campus. Staff relocation from closures continues as clients move to new cottages.

There have been cuts in other services as well. Although all Day Services programs were to be privatized, this has not occurred yet. Hope for farm and greenhouse programs to stay on campus with dual oversight. The Gatehouse Café closed June 24, 2016, it had been open to the public for years, and served as one of several interfaces between STS and the town of Southbury. All sheltered workshops are federally mandated to close by September, 2018. Staff layoffs continue, including several maintenance workers, and sixteen cook attendants. Residential staff now prepares food on the cooks' days off. More lay-offs are expected to be announced in the future.

Last year, our two music therapists were laid off and the music therapy internship program was discontinued as a result. The Home & School Association has supported keeping the two therapists working on a part time basis, until arrangements could be made to bring them back. Their services have been sorely missed.

One firefighter was also laid off. STS has always partnered with the town of Southbury, providing its own Fire Department and Ambulance service to augment the town's services. Now, STS's services are in jeopardy, which will place a burden on the town's resources and residents.

Doctor on-call protocol changed to 4:30pm-8am, 7 days a week. A considerable number of actual and planned retirements are affecting the professional staff, including two doctors. One had been the Medical Director and also had patient caseload. The new Acting Medical Director will fill that position, in addition to her other responsibilities. One Physical Therapist has also resigned, and the head of Day Program is due to retire July 1, 2017.

CT Public TV (CPTV) in partnership with the CT Council on Developmental Disabilities (CTCDD) produced a documentary entitled "Building A Great Life", promoting the closure of Connecticut's remaining state-operated ICF/IID. The CTCDD is taxpayer funded, and operates as a branch of the state government. The documentary is but another example of why CT's budget is such a mess. One branch of the government is using taxpayer dollars to fund propaganda against services provided by the state as part of its safety net, instead of using the money to directly support the people who need services. The film is designed to promote the idea that the problem of the ever-increasing waiting lists in CT can be solved by closing the state's ICF's. The film fails to provide anything but anecdotal evidence of these claims. Only two people with family members in STS (Diana Mennone and Hugo Dwyer) were featured in the film, which was edited to refute any statements that either one made in defense of larger congregate care facilities.