

Delaware: Repurposing Stockley

The News Journal * October 16, 2013

Summary: State Report recommends opening access to Delaware's Stockley Center: Report proposes ways to expand public use of state-run complex

The Stockley Center, an underutilized state-run facility for people with developmental disabilities, also should be a medical training center, a public nature preserve, a community center and possibly the keystone of a mixed-use development, the state's health secretary said Tuesday in summarizing a years-long effort to re-imagine the complex.

"We do see this as one of Delaware's gems," said Rita Landgraf, secretary of the Department of Health and Social Services, at a conference on public health. "What can we do to enable the public to have access and see this gem?"

The 750-acre facility, just outside Millsboro near Sussex Central High School, is one of the largest parcels of state-owned land in Delaware outside of its state parks.

In 2009, there were 84 adults at Stockley; today, there are 61 full-time residents getting intensive care, with some more residents in a group home on the property, said executive director Adele Wemlinger.

Seeing a large property's population shrink, Landgraf and her department proposed "expanding the property's use to be as effective as possible to benefit the state at large," according to the report.

Some 307 acres already are part of a nature preserve, but a security gate controls access to the whole property, including the woodlands.

The report recommends beefing up a rudimentary network of walking trails and opening the woodlands to public access.

The state "envisions a multiple-use system which could be segmented for specific users - in wheelchairs, on bicycles, using walkers, strollers or running.

Within three years, DHSS could consider adding an indoor community sports center or outdoor playing fields, and a therapeutic horseback riding program already at Stockley could be opened up to more people, according to the report.

During the changes under consideration, Landgraf said, Stockley will continue to care for people who have serious developmental disabilities.

The Mary Ann Coverdale Center, built in 2009 with housing wings, therapy rooms, a cafeteria and connected to a pool that wheelchair users easily can use, is staying open, she said.

"We do have individuals who still live here on site. It is critically important that we bring inclusion to them," Landgraf said.

"This was not a discussion of closing Stockley. Sometimes I hear that, out in the public. But we are not closing Stockley."

The report envisions three other major new uses of the Stockley Center.

It could house a medical residency program to give doctors-in-training more experience treating people with disabilities and house dental clinics for the poor.

The report also recommends making it possible for anyone with a disability, not only Stockley residents, to use its therapeutic pool.

Under the banner of "learning and education uses," the report suggests adding life skills and job training programs for people with disabilities, as well as a loosely defined "center for volunteer and not-for-profit groups."

In the recommendation proposing the greatest change from the status quo at Stockley, the report floats the development of "mixed-use, mixed-type construction for residential housing, offices, centers for community activities and retail."

Setting up a seasonal farmer's market and community gardens also was recommended.

Read the Report and Recommendations of the Stockley Initiative Task Force
http://dhss.delaware.gov/dhss/admin/files/stockley_finaldraft101513.pdf