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National Organization Says “Lives are at Stake”; Calls for a delay on vote on future of the Northern and Southern Resource Centers for fragile Oklahomans with profound intellectual and developmental disabilities

The newly-hired Director of the Oklahoma Department of Human Services, Ed Lake, has said he wants to “hit the ground running” when he takes office on November 1.

One national organization is hoping he will trade his running shoes for walking shoes, at least to decisions pertaining to the futures of Southern Oklahoma Resource Center (SORC) in Pauls Valley, and the Northern Oklahoma Resource Center NORC in Enid, which now serve 126 and 115 residents, respectively, with severe intellectual disabilities.

[VOR](#), a national organization advocating for high quality care and human rights for all people with intellectual and developmental disabilities, has raised questions about the ability of the new Director and the Oklahoma Commission for Human Services to make an informed decision when it meets on November 1.

“November 1 marks the first day of Director Lake’s new job and only the second or third meeting for the four newly appointed Commissioners. Even the five veteran Commissioners have spent the vast majority of its time on the Children’s Rights lawsuit,” said Tamie Hopp, VOR’s Director of Government Relations & Advocacy. “For the past 11 months, the SORC family association has been allowed less than 30 minutes in public sessions of the Commission’s meetings to discuss its concerns. 10 of these minutes were only offered after a vote was tabled due to alleged Open Meetings Act violations.”

The stakes are high for the fragile individuals directly impacted by the Commissions’ decision. Both resource centers Medicaid licensed facilities serving Oklahoma’s most fragile citizens with intellectual and developmental disabilities. The vast majority of the residents at each facility have profound intellectual disabilities – the minds of infants or young toddlers – along with other disabilities, medical needs and behavioral challenges.

“Other states that have downsized and closed centers did so expecting higher quality and cost savings,” said Hopp. “Instead, widespread tragedies have been the result. Within the last two years, thousands of fragile citizens with intellectual and developmental disabilities have suffered abuse, neglect and death in community settings in New York, Florida, Illinois, Virginia, Georgia, Florida, Missouri, Oregon, Michigan, and California.”

Other states have run counter to the trend, reinvesting in its resource centers by providing necessary upgrades. In Missouri, new homes are being built on its Bellefontaine center campus in St. Louis. In 2009, Delaware invested \$30 million to construct a new 54-bed facility specifically designed for individuals with developmental disabilities. Last year, Kansas rejected a proposal to close its facility in Topeka after determining doing so would not result in cost savings, due in part to the revenues it would lose from federal funding and spending by center employees.

Like most states, the cost of care at NORC and SORC is at the center of deliberations regarding their future. The experiences of states like Missouri, Delaware and Kansas, backed by cost comparison research, suggest that cost savings should not be assumed.

A [2003 study](#) which looked specifically at cost comparisons of community and facility-based settings found that community settings are not inherently less expensive, and may cost more, if all costs are accounted for, taking into account the needs of those to be served.

“It’s folly to assume cost savings will be realized when you relocate high needs individuals from a single service setting that provides for all their specialized needs and scatter them throughout a city,” said Hopp. “If all necessary, life-sustaining services are provided – as they are now at NORC and SORC – the State will be hard pressed to find savings. Of course, the families fear that corners will be cut to make ends meet. That’s when good intentions regarding hoped for cost savings become human tragedies.”

VOR hopes that Oklahoma will heed lessons learned and follow the lead of those states which have offered choices to families.

“Ideally, Director Lake and the Commission will ultimately see the need for NORC and SORC. Both facilities offer highly specialized, cost effective care to its residents. Their locations in the State also make it convenient for families to visit their loved ones often,” said Hopp. “For now, like the families, we hope that the decision-makers will acknowledge they need more time, that November 1 is not the day to decide the fate of these necessary centers.”

The fate of the Commission itself is also in question. On Election Day, voters will decide whether to amend the state’s Constitution to, among other things, do away with the constitutionally-established Commission.

About VOR:

VOR is a national organization that advocates for high quality care and human rights for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities. Offering community, legal, medical and educational resources for families of individuals with special needs, VOR is committed to providing help for people with disabilities. Standing up for long term care facilities and community disability programs, VOR is dedicated to maintaining family choice for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities. For more information about VOR, please visit us at www.vor.net.

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