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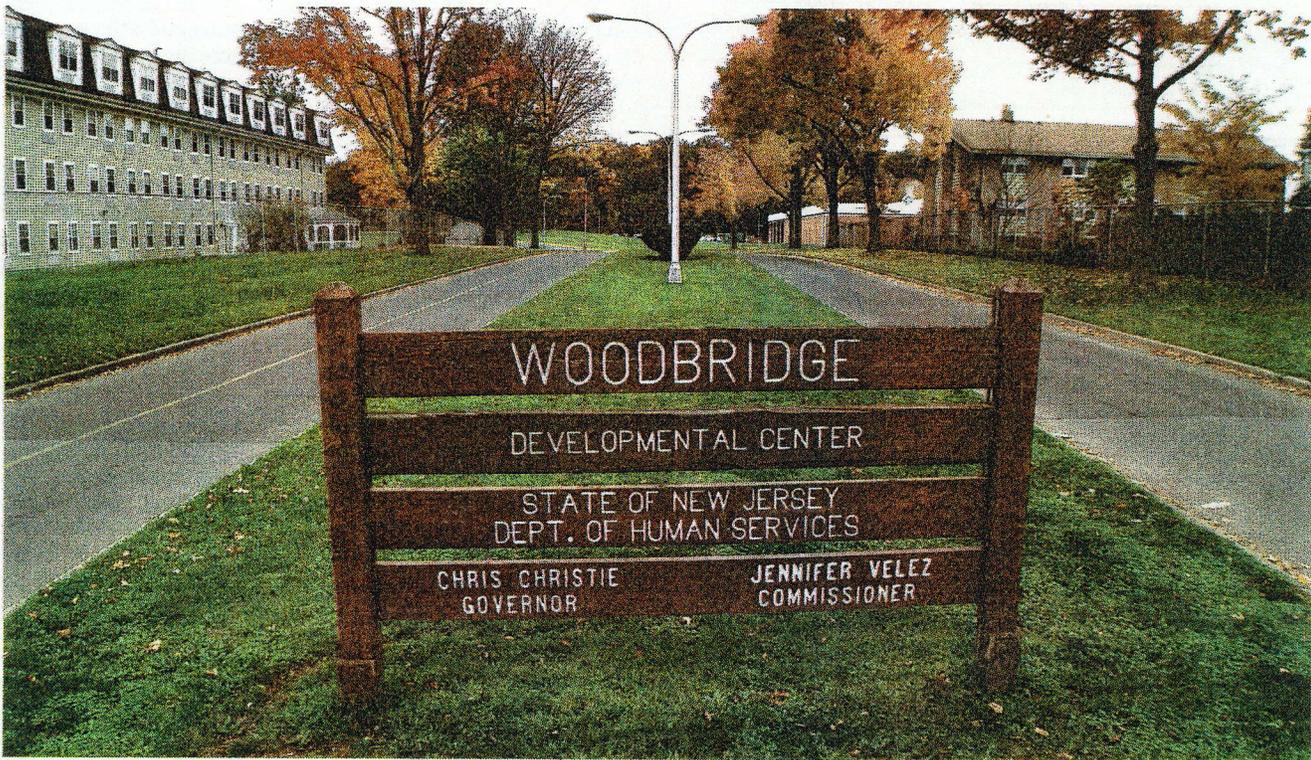
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WATCHDOG REPORT

PLANS FOR CLOSURE STIR ANGUISH, FEAR

Families rely on developmental center



Woodbridge Developmental Center is targeted for closure, but advocates and families of residents say group homes are not a viable alternative for many residents. AUGUSTO F. MENEZES/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

By Suzanne Russell

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WOODBIDGE — Woodbridge Developmental Center is home for Marilyn Carr's, 53-year-old son Eugene, the place where he has lived for the past 37 years.

And the people who work at the Rahway Avenue facility are his family.

"And they are my family, too, because they take care of my son, and I can't," said Carr, who moved to Rahway to be near her son after raising her family in Woodbridge and South Amboy. "The workers there are our family."

Carr said the 68-acre developmental center campus setting has all of the services to help her son, who has limited cognitive ability and was not expected to live past his second or third birthday.

Plans are in the works to close the facility and relocate many of the residents to group homes in communities throughout the state. But Carr thinks that her son will not get the services and attention he currently receives under this plan, and she is concerned that he will be moved so far away that she will never get to see him.

"I don't understand why this is happening after all these years. It's man's inhumanity to man, as far as I am concerned," she said. "There is no reason for it."

She would like Gov. Chris Christie to reconsider plans to close the developmental centers.

Carr is among a group of peo-



Joanne St. Amand of Cranford holds picture of her sister Rosemary, a resident of the Woodbridge Developmental Center. She is worried about the facility's possible closure. ROBERT WARD / STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER



Marilyn Carr of Rahway holds picture of her son, Eugene, a resident of Woodbridge Developmental Center. She also is concerned about plans to close the facility. ROBERT WARD/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

THE SEVEN CENTERS

The New Jersey Division of Developmental Disabilities administers seven residential developmental centers. They are:

- » Green Brook Regional Center, Somerset County
- » Hunterdon Developmental Center, Hunterdon County
- » New Lisbon Developmental Center, Burlington County
- » North Jersey Developmental Center, Passaic County
- » Vineland Developmental Center, Cumberland County
- » Woodbine Developmental Center, Cape May County
- » Woodbridge Developmental Center, Middlesex County

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CENTER

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ple with relatives living at the Woodbridge Developmental Center who are expected to attend a public hearing early next year where the state's plans to close the Woodbridge facility will be discussed. The state Senate Health and Human Services Committee and Assembly Human Services Committee hearing will be co-chaired by state Sen. Joseph Vitale, D-Middlesex, and Assemblywoman Valerie Vainieri Huttle, D-Bergen.

No date has been set for the January hearing, which is expected to be conducted at Montclair State University. The hearing originally planned for Oct. 31 was postponed because of Hurricane Sandy.

Vitale said the hearing is being conducted in connection with a state plan to close two of the seven state developmental centers, move some residents into community or group homes and consolidate the centers.

Task force report

Woodbridge Developmental Center is one of two centers that were recommended for closure in August by the Task Force on the Closure of State Developmental Centers, created by the Legislature. The task force, which evaluated all of the centers, presented the recommendation to the state Department of Human Services, Division of Developmental Disabilities, which has

been working to provide individuals with resources and support in the communities.

The other facility slated for closure is the North Jersey Developmental Center in Totowa, according to the Save Residents Homes at Developmental Centers, a coalition formed to keep both facilities open. The coalition has called on the state Department of Human Services to stop movement of residents and allow time to review the task force's findings.

The task force report noted declining populations in the centers, as well as a number of residents whose teams have recommended they move into the community, and the readiness of agencies to expand community-based homes for residents leaving the center. The report recommended that the two facilities be closed within five years. Relatives, however, have heard the facilities may close within two years. A group representing the families has hired an attorney to advise relatives of their rights.

About 1,600 people are expected to lose their jobs with the closures.

"The binding decision of the task force is to close within five years. There is no specific closure date at this time, other than meeting the requirement of closing the center within the five-year time period," said Pam Ronan, Department of Human Services public information officer.

"Each of the developmental centers' residents will be considered individually. Each person and

their family or legal guardian, together with the team of professionals they work with, will decide on the best possible residential option. Many will choose a group home or other community residential program; while others may transfer to another one of the state developmental centers," Ronan said.

While the recommendation to consolidate is partly cost-related, Vitale said that the Department of Justice has been in Woodbridge and other places and found that there are those who live in facilities throughout the state who could thrive in a community setting.

With admission to Woodbridge Developmental Center frozen, unless it's an extreme case, the Department of Justice and others are trying to force the state to take a hard look at which residents can survive and thrive in a community setting, he said.

And for those who are nonambulatory and can't thrive, there are plans to place them in consolidated developmental centers, he said.

"The challenge for the state is there is not nearly enough infrastructure in the community to accept many of these residents," said Vitale, vice chair of the Senate Health, Human Services and Senior Citizens Committee. "The challenge for the state will be in finding the appropriate setting for them and for communities to accept them in group homes. We can't have any 'NIMBY' (not in my backyard) action going on here."

Joan Cranford Woodbridge Developmental Center, said. "It's around whose is prof development centers," Ronan said.

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Joanne St. Amand of Cranford, president of the Woodbridge Developmental Center Parents Association, said the facility has a campuslike setting.

"It's a very pleasant surrounding," said St. Amand, whose sister, Rosemary, 57, is profoundly intellectually disabled and has lived at the facility since she was 20.

"She has the cognitive ability of a 3-month-old," St. Amand said. "She doesn't make eye contact. She can't roll over. You have to lift her and carry her."

But Carr said St. Amand's sister can sense when someone touches her, bathes her or feeds her.

"Like a baby, they know," Carr said. "That's what these people are."

Working as a team

About 330 residents, with an average age of 52, live in the 18 one-story residential cottages at the Woodbridge Developmental Center, which opened in 1965. About 10 to 15 people live in each cottage, which also features community rooms. Some cottages have all residents in wheelchairs. As the population has decreased, some cottages have been renovated, such as the one now being used to house a thrift shop.

Most people living in the cottages are severely and profoundly intellectually disabled, St. Amand said. At one time, there was a larger population and more higher-functioning individuals.

St. Amand and Carr said the team of people that

works with the residents know the residents' diets and needs.

"They are very used to the individuals around them," St. Amand said. "It's a family."

In 2009, the family advocates for six of the seven centers got together and sent out a postcard survey, asking families if they were in favor of or opposed to community placement.

"The response was overwhelming that 96 percent of the families want their individuals to stay in the developmental center," St. Amand said.

Another survey this year showed 96 percent opposed community placement, she said.

Vitale, however, said other parent groups would like to see their loved ones in a community setting, if possible.

"If it works for them, that's great. If it doesn't work for them, then it shouldn't happen," Vitale said.

With most residents in their 50s, St. Amand said, many have lost their parents or their parents are in their 80s.

She talked to one couple, both of whom are in their 80s, who fear that if their child is moved from the Woodbridge facility, they will never see them again.

"That's me," Carr said. "I don't drive at night. I'll never see him again."

St. Amand said some people take public transportation just to get to the Woodbridge facility.

"These are the most profoundly disabled individuals in the developmentally disabled population. It's

a tribute to the staff and the system that they are even still alive," said St. Amand, adding that her sister wasn't expected to live past her teens.

Life in the community

"We have gone through moving people into the community who can survive in the community," St. Amand said. "There have been years and years of this transition. So what you have now in the developmental center, in my opinion, are the very profoundly disabled. Ninety percent are classified as severe or profoundly intellectually disabled. You don't see that population."

She said advocates who are in the business of building group homes think everyone should be in a group home in the community. She said plans for group homes call for about four residents in each home — two ambulatory and two nonambulatory.

"They will never get the care, healthwise or any other way (in the community)," Carr said.

St. Amand said developmental centers follow the most comprehensive program offered by Medicaid, which provided individualized active treatment programs. Those programs not available in the community setting.

"If our individuals go into the community, they will be giving up these services," St. Amand said, adding that the residents receive therapy, have goals

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CLOSURE

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and take trips in their wheelchairs. "Active treatments plans is the heart of that."

At the centers, the residents are kept hydrated and their diets are carefully monitored.

"They all have difficulty swallowing," St. Amand said. "Even a drink of water has to be thickened."

St. Amand said there is a revolving door of staff in the community because they are not paid well. That constant change can be upsetting to residents.

Carr said her son will fight if he doesn't know someone. She said the people at the developmental center know how to handle him. Others won't.

"He will be abused," she said. "There are no two ways about that. There could be abuse (in the community) and nobody would say anything."

And that makes her worry.

St. Amand said the centers are not perfect, but there is oversight to investigate and correct problems while the communities investigate themselves.

"They say they are spending way too much

money on too few. When you compare services and compare those in the community, they can't do it as efficiently as in the centers," St. Amand said.

Vitale said some developmental center residents receive around-the-clock care and observation. And for some of them, that has to continue, he said.

He said the state doesn't want to put anyone at risk.

The problem with putting the developmentally disabled in the community is there are not enough resources or infrastructures. He said there is a backlog for group homes run by nonprofits.

"We don't have the facilities," he said. "It has to make financial sense for those individuals in the nonprofit world and the for-profit world who would run several group homes to afford to build them safely and appropriately," Vitale said.

He said the function of the hearing will be layered to talk about all of those things.

St. Amand said that while developmental centers are accused of warehousing the developmentally disabled, if developmental center residents are placed in the community, they are going to be isolated.

"It's a different social involvement," she said.

St. Amand said there are about 75 volunteer organizations from the surrounding towns that come to conduct events, decorate, etc., provide gifts, crochet blankets, and make hats and mittens for residents of Woodbridge Developmental Center.

"You want to talk about a community. This is where it is. Not out there. It's not that nice out there," St. Amand said.

Vitale said that some of the residents have emotional ties to the facilities where they have lived for decades.

"Any change in their environment is more than just disconcerting for them. It's extremely upsetting, profoundly so," he said. "That has to be measured, as well. And I think the state has a responsibility to care about their well-being first, not just dollars and cents."

Change can be life-threatening for some residents, St. Amand said.

"They sense distress," she said. "They stop eating, bang their heads. It can take several months for workers to gain the trust of a developmentally disabled person and work cooperatively together. The quality of life and their

safety is something that we all worry about. They can't speak for themselves. They haven't uttered a word in their entire life.

"For this population, it's tragic to move them. Tragic to move them at this age. We're talking about senior citizens. We're talking about 250 plus who are between the ages of 45 and 65. There is no one under 30 from what I understand. What are we doing here?"

Carr said that if the families don't fight for them, no one else will.

"With these individuals this is their home," said Carr, who has been collecting signatures from people who don't want to see the center closed. "It's a heart-breaking thing. It tears your heart out. As a mother it kills you. It kills you every day you look at them every time you think about them. When no one else is there to care for them. What will happen to them?"

Choice for families

"Families should have choice. If we want to stay there, we should stay

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Choice for families

"Families should have choice. If we want to stay there, we should stay

there," said St. Amand, noting that the nearest developmental center in Green Brook is for geriatric residents. There also is a center in Hunterdon County. The rest are in South Jersey.

"If they weren't being taken care of, we wouldn't say that," Carr said.

Vitale agrees that it's a hike to travel regularly to developmental centers in Vineland or Clinton from the Middlesex County area, especially for aging parents.

"These are elderly people who want to be able to see their son or daughter, sister or brother, and you don't want to put them at risk, either," he said.

Vitale, who is unsure whether Christie has ever toured one of the developmental centers, said that ultimately the decision will be made at the front office.

St. Amand and others have suggested building group homes around the perimeter of the developmental center property, and use the centers for resources because there is an outdoor pool, greenhouses,

canteen, recreational room, buses and vans on the property.

"I think it's a great idea," Carr said.

"Unless you walk in the shoes of the family members that take care of these individuals, to erode the family's rights and their choice is very tragic," said St. Amand, who said she prays every day that the recommendation will be reversed. "It's so upsetting. Families just want to know they are safe and being taken care of."

"It's a terrible thing," Carr added. "You sit here and you think, 'God, please let me last longer than him so I know he's taken care of. And then you are going to take him away from me.' It's a horrible, horrible thing. I have to fight it no matter how I can."

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INSIDE

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