

# Does mainstreaming serve disabled or simply save cash?



A BASIC moral test of society is how it treats its most vulnerable members. Among the most vulnerable are the intellectually disabled, whose rights typically have been marginalized.

Pennsylvania's current imbroglio over care for individuals with intellectual disabilities poses the most urgent moral claim on the conscience of advocacy groups, public policy makers and those who operate community-based programs as well as the state's five centers for the mentally challenged.

State centers are under attack. Certain advocacy groups tend to liken them to their early, 20th-century predecessors, in which containment, restraint and shock therapy were accepted practices for treatment by an inadequately trained staff.

The Disability Rights Network of Pennsylvania, a Philadelphia-based advocacy group for disabled persons, filed a federal class-action lawsuit last summer against the state Department of Public Welfare, challenging the department's practice of holding mentally retarded adults at state psychiatric hospitals and centers.

The suit, filed on behalf of eight adults with mental retardation, alleges DPW is not doing enough to transfer individuals who are institutionalized into community-based programs that would better suit their needs and, in the process, is hindering their ability to lead fuller lives. The suit also contends that DPW has failed to provide adequately

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## COMMENTARY

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trained staff.

Unfortunately, the suit does not take into consideration those intellectually disabled individuals who offer significant health care challenges and cannot function independently or express their own feelings about how and where they want to live. Nor does it consider those of their aging parents who can no longer care for them at home.

The suit also fails to acknowledge the ongoing efforts of state institutions such as the White Haven Center to implement the most up-to-date therapies, hire a well-trained staff and create greater opportunities for patients to interact with the local community in a variety of activities ranging from Special Olympics to a foster grandparent program.

The Disability Rights Network's suit is only the most recent salvo in what looks to be a concerted effort by the commonwealth to close the remaining state centers for the intellectually disabled.

Since 1986 four of the nine state centers and most of the state hospital units for individuals with mental retardation have closed. The remaining five state centers – Polk, Ebensburg, Selinsgrove, Hamburg and White Haven – are in a holding pattern.

Those centers serve approximately 1,200

people at an annual cost of about \$240,000 per person. Admission to the centers is rare because of the state's preference to place the intellectually disabled in community-based programs. As a result, the average age of the population is 58.

Recent budget cuts amounting to \$6 million will have a huge impact on the ability to meet the needs of the residents at the remaining centers, which are funded completely by public dollars.

Many families who have placed their loved ones in the remaining state centers are concerned that – with limited admissions, an aging population and a decrease in funding – they, too, will be closed.

Economic considerations appear to dictate a phasing out of the centers; however, there are some important moral issues at stake. If the state centers are closed, what happens next? Will community-based services be phased out as well under the guise of a new philosophy that the intellectually disabled are better off being mainstreamed?

If those actions are taken, are we, as a society, really respecting the rights of the intellectually disabled, or even the differences between the intellectually disabled and the non-disabled? Or is it just another way of saving more money for Pennsylvania?

Only time will tell.

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