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April 6, 2012

VOR Weekly News Update

News and views for VOR advocates

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Reaching the Media

2. Reopen Southbury Training School Admissions

The Hartford Courant (Commentary) * April 1, 2012

About the author: David Kassel of Harvard, Mass., is communications director of the Southbury Training School Home and School Association.

Stan and Kathy Peters of Killingworth are facing the daunting task of finding a residential placement for their grown daughter, Sarah, 28, who is intellectually disabled. The Peters would like to retire to Florida. Sarah, who now lives at home, would like her independence. But there is a waiting list in Connecticut for placements in group homes, and the wait can be years.

We have a suggestion that we believe would be a win for everyone. Instead of closing the Southbury Training School, as we believe the Malloy administration is now moving at full speed to do, the facility should be opened for the first time in more than 25 years to new admissions. Southbury would probably not be the right place for Sarah, who is clearly much higher functioning than the average resident there. But it would be right for many people who are ahead of her right now on the waiting list for group homes.

Reversing course and opening Southbury would shorten the time that Sarah and her family would have to spend waiting for a residential placement to open up. It would immediately make a large and well-run residential facility with cottages and a beautiful campus available to people throughout the state who have been waiting for such an opportunity. To that extent, it would help solve the waiting list problem in general in Connecticut.

Secondly, opening Southbury would help reduce the cost of care per resident, which has risen steadily because the center has been closed to new admissions since the mid 1980s. Because of the lack of new admissions, the fixed costs of operating the center have been spread over a steadily shrinking base of residents.

Unfortunately, the Malloy administration is heading in the opposite direction. It is turning its back on Southbury and its residents and families and is ignoring the vast effort and hundreds of millions of dollars that have gone into improving the facility in the past two decades, bringing it to world-class status.

Southbury today is closely integrated with its surrounding community, meets strict federal standards of care and remains the best setting available in the state for the long-term well-being of its residents, according to the vast majority of the families and guardians there.

The Department of Developmental Services, however, is using the 2010 *Messier v. Southbury Training School* federal court settlement as a basis for emptying the center of its remaining residents by transferring them into community group homes as quickly as possible. The *Messier* settlement, which was reached without the input or approval of the families and guardians at Southbury, is based on outdated presumptions about the care provided at this institution.

While administration officials will not admit publicly that they are moving to shut down Southbury, internal DDS documents, obtained under Freedom of Information Act requests, project the virtual closure of the facility in six to nine years. Meanwhile, as community residences are developed or found for each of the more than 400

remaining residents at Southbury, what does this mean for Sarah Peters and the hundreds of other people waiting with her for residential placements? It means adding more years to the already unacceptable waiting time they are currently being forced to endure.

Connecticut has a serious problem in providing services and places to live for people with intellectual disabilities. Now is the time to explore every avenue to solve that problem, to re-examine long-held presumptions, and to step outside of rigid ideologies. It is not the time for business-as-usual approaches that are opposed by the families and guardians at Southbury and that will only worsen conditions for Sarah Peters and her peers in the DDS system.

Related post by David Kassel: Why we're concerned about the Connecticut DDS waiting list

As we note in our op-ed article in *The Hartford Courant*, allowing new residents into STS would do something real to help solve the waiting list problem by making existing cottages on the campus available to people with severe and profound levels of disability in the state who are waiting for residential services. This would in turn open up opportunities for community-based residential placements for higher functioning people such as Sarah Peters of Killingworth who is currently facing a wait that could be years for such an opportunity.

Why the apparent rush to close STS and potentially make the waiting list problem worse? We think part of the answer lies in an anti-institutional and anti-governmental ideology, promoted by organizations like the Arc of Connecticut. This ideology has given rise to court battles here and in other states to close state developmental centers. But as noted above, there may be more going on here. In Connecticut, the Malloy administration is also talking about reducing state funding for all residential services for the intellectually disabled, both public and private.

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