

Officials: Holly Center not closing, will be 'reimagined'

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Plans to find new uses for empty buildings at the Holly Center and repair others at the Snow Hill Road campus got a round of applause from advocates for the developmentally disabled and local officials at a meeting Monday.

"We will not close the Holly Center, we will reimagine it," Secretary Dennis R. Schrader of Health and Mental Hygiene told the group gathered at the Wicomico Youth & Civic Center.

State officials plan to modernize the existing operations at the 40-year-old residential facility and reinforce its mission of caring for people with developmental disabilities, but they also will partner with the Wicomico County Health Department which will move its behavioral health program there.

Other options for the reorganization include consolidating existing residents into another cottage and creating a residential treatment center in other space, as well as a place for collaboration with the Maryland Department of Human Resources.

Further space could be used for a new behavioral health and developmentally disabled unit for patients transitioning from a mental health facility. Another priority would expand respite –



support through relief for caregiving family members – in other available space.

Schrader said he also has plans to reopen the pool that is used for therapy and is looking to partner with someone willing to operate it.

The department plans to invest \$392,400 to repair three roofs and \$166,000 to upgrade and fix the pool. The funding for the roofs will go before the state Board of Public Works for its approval on Wednesday, May 10, he said.

Salisbury resident Bob Freeman said he was happy the pool would once again become a community resource. In addition to the Holly Center residents, it was once used by his autistic son as well as special education students at Pinehurst Elementary School.

"It's not any good sitting there," he said.

The plans also came as good news to Mark Engberg, whose sister, Mary Beth, was a Holly Center resident for 20 years. Since her death in 2004, Engberg has become a champion for the remaining residents who rely on Holly Center's services.

Engberg said he would like to see the state open Holly Center to more admissions. Currently, there are about 50 residents living in four cottages, but the state's new plan would consolidate them into three.

"I still would like to see four viable cottages," he said.

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Schrader encouraged Engberg and other members of the public to email their ideas for services offered at Holly Center to hollycenter.reimagined@maryland.gov prior to Labor Day.

The Holly Center once had about 200 residents in nine cottages, Engberg said. In recent years, the state's Developmental Disabilities Administration has shifted toward having developmentally disabled residents receive care in group homes where services are cheaper and patients can maintain community connections and support, state officials have said.

For years, local officials feared Holly Center might close and had been unable to secure a commitment from the state about its future until now. The latest efforts came as the result of meetings with Wicomico County officials, the Eastern Shore Delegation and the Greater Salisbury Committee.

Norm Conway, a former member of the House of Delegates from Wicomico County and a longtime Holly Center advocate, said there has been local support for Holly Center dating back to 1970 when the county purchased the land and gave to to the state for the facility.

"I think that commitment was there then, and I think it's still there," he said.

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