Connecticut State Report 2020 — By Marty and Hugo Dwyer

Connecticut has four state-operated intermediate care centers for individuals with intellectual disabilities (ICF/IID). The largest, Southbury Training School (STS), currently has a population of 157. The residences are cottages, located in ten cottages around the 420-acre campus. Originally, there were 125 buildings on a 1,600-acre campus. STS has an aging IDD population, as the state legislature closed it to new admissions in 1986. At that point, there were 1,111 residents at the school.

Additionally, there are three regional centers, Lower Fairfield Center in Norwalk, Northwest Center in Torrington, and Hartford Center in Newington. There are approximately 150 persons who reside in these three centers. Connecticut also has several private ICFs, but most of the IDD population lives in their family home, their own home, or a group home.

The United States was woefully unprepared for the COVID-19 epidemic. It first hit Washington State, then appeared in the New York area and spread quickly to New Jersey and Connecticut. Connecticut did not have sufficient personal protective equipment. COVID tests were hard to come by. The virus hit extra hard in long-term care facilities, especially those with aging and vulnerable populations, like the residents of STS.

In early March, STS Director Eugene Harvey began implementing precautions to minimize the spread of COVID-19. These included restricting staff members to a single cottage and minimizing the cottages in which nurses work. All campus and community recreational activities were discontinued. No visitors, including family members and guardians, have permitted on campus. In the absence of laboratory nasal swab tests, temperatures of both staff and residents have been taken twice each shift. All staff have been wearing masks and gloves and, if they had been in contact with anyone who has tested positive, eye protection and gowns. Cleaning protocols were intensified and increased.

In spite of these efforts, COVID-19 appeared on the STS campus on March 30. At this point, The State of Connecticut still did not have sufficient testing supplies. STS had only 9 tests that were about to expire. These tests were given to residents who were considered to be at risk. Five were negative, four positive. On April 9th, a cluster of twelve positive tests were found in another cottage. Residents who tested positive for COVID-19 were moved to a separate cottage that was recently refurbished and cleaned for easier social distancing. There are four common areas in the new cottage and there was only one in the old cottage. That move is permanent. The move was accomplished in 4 hours thanks to very dedicated staff.

As of April 9, nineteen residents had and nineteen staff members had tested positive.

Sadly, three staff members and one resident of STS have died from COVID-19.

As of this writing, there have been no further cases. Staff morale is higher than ever. A strong sense of community, of shared hope, struggle and loss, fills the campus. The newly adopted motto of Southbury Training School is “STS Strong!”

ADDENDUM:

Because of COVID-19, hospitals and other medical settings were not allowing the families, guardians, or caregivers of persons with disabilities the opportunity to accompany their loved ones to the hospital. Advocacy groups filed a complaint with the U.S. Office of Civil Rights on May 4th to overturn that decision.

On June 9th. the federal Office of Civil Rights reached an

agreement with the state of Connecticut allowing caregivers of those with disabilities to have a support person accompany them to hospitals and other medical settings.

As part of the resolution, Connecticut Gov. Ned Lamont is expected to issue an executive order to ensure that people with disabilities have reasonable access to support personnel in hospital settings in a manner that is consistent with disability rights laws and the health and safety of patients, healthcare providers, and support person.

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