

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 130. The residences are cottages, located in eight 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 were approximately 132 persons residing 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 apartment, or a group home.

When the COVID-19 epidemic began in 2020 the United States was woefully unprepared. 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.

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In early March 2020, STS Director Eugene Harvey began implementing precautions to minimize the spread of COVID-19. In spite of these efforts, COVID-19 appeared on the STS campus on March 30. Two cottages were organized to house individuals who require isolation or quarantine. As of the date hereof, only one individual is residing in one of these cottages and will move back to his regular cottage soon.

Sadly, four staff members and one resident of STS died from COVID-19 in 2020.

Residents and staff members continue to test positive for COVID 19, but there have been no additional deaths.

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As of July 1 of this year, annual increases in pension benefits for employees of STS and the regional centers were reduced and a large number of staff members have retired. STS and the regional centers are actively recruiting new employees and vacancies are nearly filled. STS Director Eugene Harvey retired on April 1 and Kathy Hanewicz, his long-time assistant director, replaced him on that date. Eugene is assisting in the transitional process and is expected to retire fully at the end of the summer.

Group homes in Connecticut, like similar facilities in most states, are suffering from severe staff shortages and considerable staff turnover. Several have closed. The Connecticut Department of Developmental Services reported that, as of December 2021, 670 individuals were waiting for placement, 64 of whom were categorized as emergencies (immediate need) and 606 of whom were reported as urgent (requiring placement within one year). There are many other individuals waiting for placement who are not in those categories and the total is believed to be close to 2500.

Residents of several group homes have experienced abuse, including one who was sexually abused, and their families have been extremely dissatisfied with the investigations of these events which, as in most states, are conducted by private providers. Their concerns have included the time the investigations are taking, conclusions which have not supported obvious abuse and lack of access to records.

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On a much different note, Connecticut was one of the last states to still have a public (state-run) Protection and Advocacy Association (P&A). It was staffed mostly by members of the deaf and the blind communities. In 2021, Connecticut's P&A became a part of the National Disability Rights Network (NDRN), an extremely powerful conglomerate of dozens of P&A's covering almost every state in the country, yet, remarkably, subject to little or no state oversight.

Disability Rights Connecticut has commenced activities relating to STS but, so far, has taken no significant action. We fear that they will seek to close STS and are watching their activities very carefully.

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The Home and School Association of the Southbury Training School, an organization of family members and friends of STS residents, has, with the generous support of a state and a private organization, has provided music and gong sessions at STS for many years and has expanded its programs to include movement therapy, more physical activity and massage. All of these programs are very much enjoyed by STS residents

*Marty Dwyer is the President of the Home and School Association.*