

Plan to close Pennhurst stirs emotional opposition

By Denise Foley
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PHILADELPHIA — Terri Lee Halderman's soft giggles rippled across the packed courtroom, rustling a few heads and catching the mild attention of U.S. District Court Judge Raymond Broderick, who made no move to gavel her into silence.

A gavel wouldn't do it.

For Terri Lee Halderman, only kisses work.

Terri Lee held out her cheek for a peck from her mother, Winifred Halderman of Yardley, who grasped the small, teasing hands firmly in hers.

Terri Lee, who later dozed noiselessly during Friday's court proceedings, is 25 years old.

Suit filed

Profoundly retarded, she was the focal point of a suit filed by her mother five years ago charging Terri Lee, then 21, was receiving inadequate treatment — because of lack of staff and funding—at the Pennhurst Center for the Retarded in Chester County.

That suit, to Mrs. Halderman's dismay, led to a court ordered plan to close the institution and place its 1,040 residents in community homes and facilities in Bucks, Montgomery, Chester, Delaware and Philadelphia counties.

Over 50 parents of Pennhurst residents, some with their children, packed Judge Broderick's courtroom Friday to oppose a plan to move all of the school-age children from Pennhurst by Sept. 1. Staff and parents picketed outside the federal courthouse at 6th and Market streets here during the proceedings, which will continue tomorrow night at 6:30.

Their fears were expressed on the stand by Judge Edward Bradley, president judge of Philadelphia's Court of Common Pleas, whose 14-year-old daughter, Michelle, is a Pennhurst resident, and who is, he says, getting fine care.

"My concern," he told Judge Broderick, a person friend, "is that we're talking about facilities that don't exist, a staff that doesn't exist. . . . We're doing a lot of talking, but if the facilities and resources are not there, I don't see this as an improvement or substitute for Pennhurst."

Broderick responds

Broderick, in an impassioned response, assured Judge Bradley that "absolutely no person is going to leave Pennhurst unless their lot is going to be improved.

"The bottom line, judge, the bottom line is that we want to give the residents of Pennhurst a better life and the chance to reach every opportunity God wants them to have," Judge Broderick said. "When we're dealing with God's children, nothing is too good."

But the truth, Pennhurst parents say, is that the Sept. 1 deadline is unreasonable, that facilities for the youngsters — 61 of them, none from Bucks County — do not now exist and cannot be arranged by that time.

Other experts testified Tuesday that appropriate facilities, and most importantly, services for the 61 youngsters, most of them severely retarded, cannot be developed by the Sept. 1 deadline.