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Outpatient program for mentally ill ordered halted

By DAVID BAUDER
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ALBANY — State officials, faced with a watchdog agency's report that the state's outpatient program for mentally ill adults lacks direction and accountability, yesterday ordered a halt on expansion of the program.

State Mental Health Commissioner Richard Surles said it seemed "prudent" to impose the moratorium until a study is done on the nation's largest state-run outpatient program. The moratorium will stretch into 1990.

Clarence Sundram, chairman of the state Commission on Quality of Care for the Mentally Disabled, said Surles is anticipating the release of his commission's critical report next week.

"There is a real problem with the focus and direction of the program the way it currently exists," Sundram said.

The state spends nearly $800 million a year on 950 separate agencies that care for more than 250,000 mentally ill adults. There are more than 100 applications on file for expansions, said Robert Spoor, spokesman for the mental health office.

Sundram said his agency found price differences of between 500 and 2000 percent on what separate outpatient programs were paying for the same services.

Most programs basically deliver clinical services to patients but do little to teach them or train them for jobs, he said. State, local and independent outpatient programs also compete for the most "compliant" mental patients instead of the more difficult ones, he said.

"Patients with more complex needs . . . tend not to get served by anybody," Sundram said.

Spoor said he didn't know if the moratorium announcement came as a direct result of Sundram's commission report.

"I don't know if there's a cause and effect relationship," Spoor said. "I'm sure he (Surles) is aware of the report. But I also know he's trying to change the system and make it more accountable."

Surles said the program is governed by a "patchwork of regulations" and it is "questionable whether they adequately reflect the system's new directions or the changing needs of the people needing outpatient services."

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CIVIL SERVICE By VINCENT LEE

Union hits service cut

The head of the New York State Public Employes Federation has blasted the state's plan to lay off more than 320 employes who work with the developmentally disabled and mentally retarded as "unjustifiable" and another example of the state's callous plan to cut services for the disadvantaged.

Rand Condell, the president of the 59,000-member union, which represents professionals working in the state Office of Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities, said the lay-offs in September will hurt the high-quality care the office's clients have been receiving.

The understaffing may also jeopardize the disbursement of millions of dollars in federal Medicaid funds to the agency's facilities, Condell said.

He also said announcing the lay-offs in July—when state lawmakers are out of session—is a lame attempt to shroud the effects on clients and staff.

"Everyone in state government knows the time to solve staffing and budget problems is during the budget process," which ends on or about the state's April 1 budget deadline, Condell said.

"Announcing a lay-off in mid-July, when state lawmakers are out of session, is disgraceful and outrageous," Condell said.

"State legislators have the responsibility to determine the direction of agencies and departments.

"OMRDD should return to the same timetable other agencies follow and have their budget and staffing levels determined by state lawmakers during the session."

Union officials said the Legislature's intent this session was to preserve jobs and services in state facilities.

On Sept. 20, 330 OMRDD employes, including 133 PEF members, are slated to lose their jobs because of state budget cuts.

"This is another example of the state's disastrous fiscal planning," Condell said. "OMRDD has adequate money to maintain client services performed by state employees. This cut is unjustifiable."

Poor fiscal planning put OMRDD in the crisis, union leaders said.

According to state figures, OMRDD earmarked only $7 million for workers' compensation and other approved leave this fiscal year. The real need is about $11 million.

To make up the difference, OMRDD must transfer money from its community-services budget. As a result, staff must be cut and the creation of 1,500 community residence beds may be scrapped.

"The state is taking the senseless, bureaucratic way out and cutting services and staff," Condell said. "New York is again incompetently managing its work force and as a result providing less quality care for those who have no voice or lobby in Albany."

Millions of federal dollars may also be jeopardized if OMRDD staff levels continue to drop, union officials said.

OMRDD clients who are on Medicaid have half their treatment paid for by the federal government. The state pays the rest.

"How does a facility maintain the level of quality care and its certification as it lays off employes?" Condell asked. "It makes no sense."

OMRDD facilities in Staten Island, Manhattan, Brooklyn, and Long Island face similar certification and Medicaid reimbursement problems because of staff shortages.

Union leaders said they are concerned OMRDD is reducing the quality of care for clients and increasing the chance of on-the-job injuries to staff.

"The professionals who face lay-off are generally direct-care, hands-on employees," Condell said. "Their severely handicapped clients will immediately feel the loss of our members' services."

According to Condell, OMRDD facilities are "dangerous places to work" and reducing the number of employees will increase the risk of job-related injuries.

A recent state Civil Service Department study showed direct-care workers in OMRDD and the state Office of Mental Health are the most likely to be injured on the job, either from assaults by clients or from physical efforts, such as lifting clients.

PEF represents about 8,000 professionals, including nurses, therapists, teachers, developmental specialists, and psychologists who work in the OMRDD system.