

State to close Taunton facility for mentally ill

By David Abel | GLOBE STAFF

After more than 150 years of housing mentally ill patients, Taunton State Hospital will close its doors, and its remaining patients will be sent to other facilities by the end of the year, state officials said yesterday.

The closing will help pay for a new hospital for the mentally ill in Worcester, which is scheduled to open this summer and may house some of the 169 patients still in Taunton, state mental health officials said.

Other patients will move into their own apartments or the equivalent of group homes linked to an array of support services, under the state's Community First program, the officials said.

"We understand that this announcement will impact the community of Taunton," Governor Deval Patrick said in a statement. "By closing the Taunton facility, we are maintaining this administration's commitment to Community First."

But advocates for the mentally ill and officials from the nurses union decried the closing of the hospital. They pointed out that it is one of six remaining state mental health hospitals and that the system would have a net loss of 125 beds since fiscal 2010, when the state closed Westborough State Hospital.

"This is a cold-hearted and dangerous decision that will have devastating consequences for the mentally ill in our state," said Karen Coughlin, a nurse at Taunton State and vice president of the Massachusetts Nurses Association. "There are not and have not been enough beds or services in the system for years. This decision will only exacerbate a long-standing crisis."

State officials said 124 of the beds will be transferred to the new Worcester Recovery Center and Hospital and 25 will be moved to Tewksbury State Hospital.

After the closing, 626 beds will remain in the state mental health system, down from 831 beds in fiscal 2007, state officials and advocates said.

Mental Health Commissioner Barbara Leadholm, who has seen her agency's budget cut by about 8 percent over the past three years, said many of the patients who have been discharged as a result of fewer beds available are now living independently, with support or supervision in the community.

Many of the patients remaining at what in 1854 opened as the State Lunatic Hospital would probably have been discharged before the end of the year, Leadholm said. On average, 70 percent of state mental health patients are released within 180 days, she said.

"We're maintaining the same capacity to meet the needs of people who require very intensive services," she said.

Leadholm said that none of the 390 full-time employees in Taunton will lose their jobs and that the department will offer them positions at the new hospital in Worcester or others.

She added that her staff would work with patients to keep them as close to their homes as possible.

"I think it is always sad to hear bad news," Leadholm said. "We will offer the support to help people understand what this will mean for them. The geography is something we will need to address."

Advocates for the mentally ill, however, questioned whether the Department of Mental Health will have sufficient money and staff to aid patients living outside the hospitals.

"I think what is particularly disturbing is that it will have a ripple effect down into the community," said Guy Beales, president of the National Alliance on Mental Illness of Massachusetts, which is based in Woburn. "Those most in need of hospital services are going to end up in emergency rooms and put pressure on local resources, which are already extremely strained from previous cuts of state resources."

Nursing union officials said the problems are already visible in emergency rooms, where psychiatric patients sometimes wait as long as 72 hours for a placement in a state hospital.

They said facilities such as Taunton State were already over capacity.

"This has gone beyond an issue of funding and finances," Coughlin said. "This is a moral and ethical issue of human rights and common decency."

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