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Partlow decision hailed as right

By Lisa Singleton-Rickman
Staff Writer

Local mental health officials are pleased with this week's closing of the W.D. Partlow Developmental Center in Tuscaloosa.

It's a decision they say is long overdue.

As president of the local and state Arc, the largest advocacy group of its kind for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities, Murray Townsend, of Killen, said the closure has been years in the making. Officials made the decision in March to close Partlow.

Townsend also praised the efforts of Gov. Robert Bentley who backed states mental health Commissioner Zelia Baugh in her efforts to close Partlow.

On Wednesday, the Partlow Center moved its last resident to a community-based living facility. Since March, 150 residents there have been relocated to communities of their and their family's choosing. Services in communities were developed throughout the year across the state.

"We were quite pleased to hear it closed Wednesday as we were anticipating it closing next month because of issues involving court orders that were having to be worked out," Townsend said. "There were 16 residents there a month ago, so they've really worked diligently to find placement."

Of those residents at Partlow, Townsend said he knows of only one who relocated to the Shoals area.

George Neal, the director of consumer empowerment for the Alabama Department of Mental Health's Division of Developmental Disabilities has visited more than half of those Partlow residents who have moved into new homes since March.

"They've been so excited to have their own room, television and bathroom," he said. "Some can't communicate with words, but I've seen their smiles when I asked them how they liked their new home."

Townsend said most were relocated to three-person group homes. Privacy laws protect those residents' identities.

"Today we know that people with disabilities can live in the community and have a fulfilling life," Townsend said. "They need to be free to live where they want."

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Alabama is one of 13 states in the nation to reach the goal of closing all residential institutions for persons with intellectual disabilities. It is the only state in the Southeast that has accomplished that goal, according to department officials.

"This is a great day for people with intellectual disabilities because it makes the statement loud and clear that we are people with abilities and we want to be integrated into society rather than segregated into an institution," said Jeff Ridgeway, president of People First of Alabama, an advocacy organization managed by people with disabilities.

The Partlow Center has been in operation since 1923. For many years, residential facilities were a viable alternative for individuals who couldn't be cared for by their families. Some residents were indigent with no family relations and institutionalization was the only option.

State Mental Health Department officials said in a statement released Wednesday that apart from an era when institutions across the country became overcrowded, "Developmental centers had their place in the evolution of care for persons with intellectual disabilities. However, as community services were developed, institutions downsized and many have closed."

Townsend said that at one time, there were more than 4,000 residents at Partlow. The large campus included a medical and dental staff and other on-premise services.

"It was totally secluded from the outside world," he said. "That's why we've been working all these years to have these facilities closed."

The Alabama Department of Mental Health will utilize a closure team for several weeks to finalize administrative and physical plant procedures.

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