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Partlow center closes after 88 years

Home for developmentally disabled shut down Wednesday

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MONTGOMERY | The W.D. Partlow Developmental Center, which was home for thousands of intellectually disabled residents, closed Wednesday after 88 years in operation in Tuscaloosa.

The Alabama Department of Mental Health said it closed Partlow as planned after a woman, the last of 150 residents who had lived at the center at the beginning of the year, was moved to a community home.



Staff file | The Tuscaloosa News

The W.D. Partlow Developmental Center closed Wednesday. Partlow, opened in 1923, was the state's only remaining facility for the intellectually disabled.

"This is a momentous day for individuals with disabilities," Mental Health Commissioner Zelia Baugh said. "With the closure of Partlow, the ADMH has affirmed its commitment to provide opportunities for people to live in the community of their choice rather than in large institutional settings."

Partlow, opened in 1923, was the state's sole remaining facility for the intellectually disabled. Its closure was determined by the trend to move residents to community-based housing and by state budget shortages. The facility cost \$42 million a year to operate.

The department originally planned to close Partlow on Sept. 30, but Gov. Robert Bentley pushed the date back to Nov. 30 because lawsuits and other issues arose.

Jeff Ridgeway, president of the advocacy group People First of Alabama, said groups have been working for years to encourage the state to close institutions.

"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," Ridgeway said.

Paul Davis was a reporter for The Tuscaloosa News who witnessed horrendous conditions at Partlow and other state facilities in the 1960s.

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He serves on the advisory board of trustees to the Department of Mental Health.

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“It was awful in so many ways,” Davis said Wednesday. “It was a place where humans became ‘things,’ things that didn’t matter. A hellish place that never belonged in a humane society.”

Ellen Gillespie, director of the Alabama Disabilities Advocacy Program, said the process of closing Alabama’s institutions was “well worth the time and effort of many advocates and stakeholders.”

She was director of the Ireland Developmental Center in 1996, the first of five centers eventually to close.

“Each of the five closures had unique obstacles and opposition, but only positive reactions from the people who had been institutionalized,” Gillespie said. “People with disabilities have shown us how happy they are to be close to their families, to have privacy, to enjoy the same things we enjoy in our communities.”

Gillespie said some Partlow residents who have been moved since the closure was announced in March had lived there for 60 years.

“This day is an important day for Alabama, for disability rights, and for civil rights,” she said.

It wasn’t always smooth going. At least two lawsuits were filed by relatives of Partlow residents claiming the state had no legal right to close Partlow and claiming their loved ones wouldn’t be in a better environment if moved. The lawsuits were unsuccessful.

Earlier this year the Centers for Medicaid and Medicare Services threatened to cut federal funding for Partlow residents after a “known pedophile” was accused of sexually abusing a then-16-year-old boy in 2010.

The alleged perpetrator had been sent to the Department of Mental Health under a court order for past sexual abuse and was around the 16-year-old despite a warning to keep him away from young people.

The situation was corrected to the Centers for Medicaid and Medicare Services’ satisfaction and the department continued its closure plans. A civil lawsuit was filed in that alleged incident.

Mental Health spokeswoman Kristi Gates said the department was able to arrange with courts for “specialized community placements” for forensic residents. She did not elaborate.

Tuscaloosa Mayor Walt Maddox and local legislators opposed Partlow’s closing because of the perceived impact on the economy, jobs, residents and the financial impact on local, non-state government services.

Hundreds of employees were to lose their jobs, but many were offered positions at other mental health facilities or with private employers. Some retired and some ultimately weren't able to get comparable jobs.

"I believe their decision was driven by funding," Maddox said. "Every piece of evidence I've seen, every conversation I've had with parents and guardians of consumers, leads me to believe this decision was based on downsizing instead. I hope everyone comes together and provides what is best for mental health consumers and not the bottom line."

Gates said a final employee tally was not immediately available.

Although the center is closed to residents, a skeleton crew will remain for several weeks to finalize administrative and physical plant closure, Gates said.

ADAP attorney James Tucker said Alabama set a standard in becoming the first state in the Southeast to close institutions like Partlow.

"In closing its last state-run institution that segregated persons with developmental disabilities, Alabama continues to improve the quality of services provided to persons with disabilities," he said. "Our experience has been consistently that once family members see improvements for their loved ones in the quality of life in the community, their objections dissipate."

Tucker warned about state funding that has been cut over several years, endangering community services to ADAP clients who face more harm than just violation of their civil rights.

"Because the DMH budget already has been slashed, and will likely be slashed again in FY13, there is a significant risk that services to persons in community placements will not have their needs met," he said. "I am gravely concerned about the ability of DMH to provide needed services to my clients in fiscal year 2013 if DMH is not level funded, or better."

Curtis James is vice-chairman of the advisory board of trustees to the Department of Mental Health. At the last board meeting members approved a letter to Bentley asking him to at least provide level funding to the department next year.

"We also request that you deem the Department of Mental Health an essential function of state government," the letter said.

In a telephone interview, James said he supports Baugh's decision to close Partlow and advises that more cuts will endanger services to consumers.