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Psychiatric Hospital 'In A State Of Crisis'  
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Staff from the state's Riverview psychiatric hospital for adolescents Thursday pleaded to state legislators for a new, secure treatment unit for juvenile delinquent girls, saying it will do much to improve hospital safety and quell recent unrest.

But several prominent children's advocates said the move won't be enough to resolve the hospital's mounting problems, which include a lack of beds for a growing list of suicidal, depressed and traumatized children being held in high-security detention centers.

Speaking before the legislature's select committee on children, Riverview employees said the hospital's current patient mix of potentially violent delinquent girls and seriously disturbed children has created a volatile environment in which both children and staff have been hurt. The employees cautioned that more serious injuries cannot be ruled out.

The tension has been exacerbated by a new treatment regimen that prohibits staff from using mechanical restraints or seclusion to maintain control, the workers said.

"Riverview is in a state of crisis," said Susan Ritz, a clinical psychologist.

Ritz said one young girl assaulted 12 patients and staff during an eight-month stay at the Middletown hospital, frequently punching lower-functioning girls from behind. The girl also threatened to kill patients at night while they slept, Ritz said.

"You can imagine the sense of insecurity that creates," Ritz said.

In another recent incident, a teenage boy involved in a planned uprising and escape later admitted that the plot included possibly killing a staff member, according to Rich Liburdi, a veteran children's service worker.

Liburdi said the Department of Children and Families' decision to mix the patient populations - driven primarily by a lack of secure treatment beds for delinquent girls - has created a culture where "status and power is gained through intimidation and violence."

Gov. M. Jodi Rell has set aside \$1 million in her 2007 budget proposal to create a small, secure facility for delinquent girls. The state has not had one since Long Lane School closed in February of 2003.

Sources said Thursday that DCF is considering establishing a four- to six-bed secure unit for girls in one of the existing cottages at Connecticut Children's Place in East Windsor. DCF Commissioner Darlene Dunbar, however, said that the agency is still weighing its options and that no decisions have been made.

While acknowledging the need for a small, secure treatment center for girls, two leading children's advocates Thursday said that much more must be done to stabilize Riverview and restore it to the national acclaim it once enjoyed.

DCF must work harder to open more specialized group homes and treatment-based foster homes

to reduce overly long stays for children at Riverview, said attorney Martha Stone, director of the Center for Children's Advocacy at the University of Connecticut School of Law.

"When you have a crisis, you need to act like it's a crisis," said Stone, who plans to discuss the backlog with a federal court judge next week as part of her ongoing class-action lawsuit on behalf of children in Connecticut detention centers.

The agency also must move faster in adopting plans for trauma-based treatment programs and gender-specific counseling needed by boys and girls at Riverview, Connecticut Child Advocate Jeanne Milstein said.

Milstein said the current crisis has resulted from DCF's failure to implement services for girls that have been talked about since Long Lane closed.

A 100-page plan for improving girls' services was released a year ago, yet most of it hasn't been acted on, she said.

With Riverview costing state taxpayers \$1,256 a day and \$458,440 a year per child, it is vital for the legislature to demand more accountability from DCF and to push agency leaders to enact these reforms, Milstein said.

"We should expect nothing less," she said.

DCF spokesman Gary Kleeblatt said the agency has already opened 12 of 24 planned group homes this year, which is part of the 100-page plan.

But a proposal to have 95 special treatment foster homes to help ease the backup at Riverview has been less successful. Of the 95 new foster homes scheduled to open by July 1, 2006, only 24 have been created to date, Kleeblatt said.

However, he said the agency is funding more family support teams to help traditional foster parents handle children in crisis until the new homes open.

Sen. Edward Meyer, D-Guilford, the select committee's Senate chairman, Thursday threatened to propose a bill calling for the closing of Riverview or a revocation of its approximately \$28 million in annual state funding if the situation there doesn't rapidly improve.

Meyer said he was "astounded" by the high cost of treating children at Riverview and the fact that the hospital is in such a state of crisis.

State Rep. Michael J. Cardin, D-Tolland, the committee's co-chairman, said that whatever happens must happen soon.

"It appears that we're almost at the end of the match before the explosion takes place," Cardin said.

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