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Bellefontaine Habilitation Center

The Bellefontaine Habilitation Center has received much attention in the last three weeks due to Governor Blunt's recommendation to close this facility. The habilitation center is located in North St. Louis County (Bellefontaine Neighbors) and has been operational for over 80 years. The City of St. Louis operated this institution until 1959, when the state purchased the facility for one dollar and assumed the responsibility of running the institution. There are currently 341 residents who have mental handicaps and developmental disabilities living at the facility.

Roughly, 140 of these residents have bipolar disorders, psychosexual disorders, oppositional defiant disorder, schizo affective disorder, and anti-social behaviors. Others have abusive behaviors, which can include self-inflicted wounds, aggressive behavior toward others, biting, banging their head against the walls, or not being knowledgeable of objects they place in their mouths and the adverse effects associated with these actions. There are many occurrences when the resident's strength is so powerful, damage occurs to the home or the furnishings in the home, which is detrimental to their personal welfare.

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Many of the residents who are physically disabled cannot bathe, use restroom facilities, dress, or even feed themselves.

Before the closure of the Bellefontaine Habilitation Center, the House and the Senate, as well as the governor, must examine the financial and human impacts to the state, such as the state's current operating cost of the habilitation center, the revenue the state will lose resulting from the closure, and the estimated cost of placing the center's 341 clients in the community. After researching this issue, the total cost to operate the Bellefontaine Habilitation Center is \$36,043,034 in fiscal year 2005. The state will receive federal and other reimbursements of \$23,102,483 to offset those costs. The difference between the two numbers, \$12,839,551, is the cost to the state of Missouri to operate the habilitation center. The Department of Mental Health estimates it will cost the state \$14,338,368 to place the 341 residents with community providers using a \$115.20 cost per day estimate (341 residents X 365 days X \$115.20). All these factors indicate the state will incur a \$1.4 million loss due to the closure of the Bellefontaine Habilitation Center ($\$14,338,368 - \$12,839,551 = \$1,498,817$). The bottom line is that the governor is increasing cost to the state taxpayer.

In regards to the human impacts to the state, Governor Blunt has been quick to cite complaints and abuse of the residents at the Bellefontaine Habilitation Center. He fails to state when employee abuses were confirmed, the appropriate employment actions were taken. There were 233 abuse claims in the last year. Of those claims, only 79 were found valid and those employees were disciplined or dismissed. These residents are adults whom have behavioral problems and at times are difficult to handle.

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More importantly, he fails to commend the hard-working and dedicated staff that everyday provide these individuals life-giving care. These employees at times work with up to six mentally retard adults at once, each resident demanding constant and continuous attention. These employees work closely with these residents and consider them their second family and can only be described as dedicated and caring. If you feel you have had a difficult day at work, put yourself in these employees shoes and maybe you will realize how dedicated they are in their occupations. To me, they are our unsung heroes.

Many of the adult residents at the habilitation center have lived at the facility for over 20 years, and some for even 50 years. The habilitation center is their home. The employees and other residents are their families. Each day when we wake up, we wake up to our parents, spouse, children, or friends. The residents at the Bellefontaine Habilitation Center wake up to the state of Missouri. They are comfortable with and are cognizant of their environment and their surroundings. I recently visited a parent's association meeting during which the brother of a resident explained how his brother is only comfortable in his home at the center under the care of Bellefontaine Habilitation Center's employees. His brother recently had to seek treatment at a local hospital. The staff had to go to the hospital to administer food and medication to this individual because he was only comfortable with treatment from his normal care providers at the facility. When one moves these residents out of an environment, they are comfortable and secure with, one risks their safety and health. An example of this is the residents at the Marshall Habilitation Center's skilled nursing unit in Marshall, Missouri.

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Many of the individuals who were placed in the community died within 90 days of their community placement. While community placement is an option for some residents, it certainly is not an option for the many clients who require a more complicated day-to-day treatment plan.

The habilitation center has 34 residential homes located on the property. The center has a gym, swimming pool, doctor, and dentist office, as well as an occupational center similar to a sheltered workshop. When the residents need care, exercise, medical treatment, or work, they travel a short distance (sometimes walking distance) to the doctor, dentist, physical therapist or other services because these services are available on the property. The proponents of the closure say the individuals are confined at the center. This is an argument difficult to understand because when one is placed in the community they tend to be confined to their house, whereas on the center's complex they have a great deal of space to walk including a conservation park located at the west side of the property. One can also argue cost would increase to the taxpayer because once they are in the community, transportation and contracting with doctors, dentist, and sheltered workshops would increase.

If parents or guardians feel their loved one could receive better service in the community, under current federal law, they can move to a community home. The parents or guardians of the individuals at the Bellefontaine Habilitation center are aware of this option. The Department of Mental Health has a five-year plan to downsize for those who want to be placed in the community.

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It is not right to close the habilitation center for those who cannot survive in the community or do not want to be placed in a community home.

I asked the governor to visit the habilitation center, so that he could have the opportunity to sit and to observe how the employees work with the residents for two hours.

This would give him a better understanding of the difficulties that a caretaker of these individuals face daily and he would gain a greater appreciation of the employees.

The governor has continually stated how he is pro-life and an advocate for the sanctity of life; however, he has not shown an equal commitment for the sanctity for the living. When you close this center you may be closing a life.

Senator Timothy P. Green
13th District
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