

TO PARENTS AND RELATIVES OF HAMBURG STATE CENTER

The forced closure of Hamburg State Center has been announced by Governor Wolf. His Department of Human Services is following the same reprehensible procedure employed by Governor Ridge's DPW Secretary Houstoun and Deputy Secretary Nancy Thaler in the systematic destruction of Western State Center, Canonsburg, PA in the late nineties through 2000:

- closing admissions;
- fabricating and exaggerating "incidents";
- staging visits of residents to a nice group homes,
- getting them to put their signature or "X" on a form "expressing desire" to leave Western Center;
- guarantees to parents that services in the community settings would be better;
- cutting back on the Center's fun, social, crafts, swimming and vocational programs;
- declaring, in violation of Olmstead v.LC, that all residents were evaluated appropriate for community placement.

Despite PA Auditor General Robert Casey (now U.S. Senator) announcing his investigation and exposure of this outrage, the unilateral closure of Western Center was announced by the governor, and two days later a fleet of DPW-contracted vans took all residents from their living quarters and transported them, unprepared, to equally unprepared "community" placements in group houses and other facilities. Parents and relatives, who came to protest or at least find out where their family members were going, were cordoned off from their residents by the PA State Police. The result of the forced outplacement process resulted in the deaths of thirty-eight former Western Center residents which were documented but never investigated as promised by DPW. Another result, as we predicted, was the hugely increased cost for necessary intensive care of ICF/DD-level individuals in community placements and an insufficient number of providers. (I just learned that Nancy Thaler, the chief architect of Western Center destruction, somehow is back in PA as DHS Deputy Secretary!)

Advice: Oppose the closing any way you can. Call the newspapers, the TV stations, your elected representatives in Harrisburg and Washington. Also, go to court if you can afford it – we did, but unfortunately we ran into a “kumbaya” judge who swallowed their (read Thaler, PARC, PA “Protection Advocacy System”) “Every Day Lives” Kool-Aid. We were winning our case (before Judge Conti in Federal Court), but we ran out of money – the State had more than we did. Also, do get legal guardianship of your resident if you don’t already have it. Legal guardianship gives you “legal standing” when decisions are being made. As a court-appointed legal guardian, you are the primary maker of decisions for your loved one whom the court has adjudged incompetent or incapable of doing so.

Laura Mooney, Last President Western Center Parents Group

Note: My own sister, Sue Riley, was one of those outplaced that awful day, and was luckily transferred to Ebensburg State Center, where she thrived and lived happily until she passed away last year. Unfortunately, Hamburg Center residents and families will most likely not be given the option to transfer to Ebensburg or any other state center, but you as a family member can fight for that option. Don't let them bully you; don't blindly accept an inappropriate placement. Work together – there is strength in numbers.