

Future of Mentally Retarded Residents is Primary Employee Concern in Columbia Park Closure

Editor's Note

Closure of Columbia Park Hospital and Training Center would affect the lives of more than 200 state employees who work at the institution. The OSEA News visited the facility recently and talked to a number of employees to learn how they felt about the closure. Here is what they said:

'This has been the most rewarding job I've ever had'

"I certainly don't like to think of the hospital being closed. I've worked here eight years and I don't like to think about leaving. This has been the most rewarding job I've ever held. Working with the mentally retarded gives me a sense of satisfaction and accomplishment. That's one reason why I don't want the hospital closed. The other reason is that I don't believe the state will be able to place our residents into community nursing and foster homes as envisioned by the legislature and the Mental Health Division. If they are not placed in local communities they will have to be placed in other institutions. Why not keep them here? They are happy, they are well cared for, and they receive excellent training. It would be a shame to lose that." —Alice Eisman, Resident's Shopper, Administration

'Many of our residents have been placed in homes that are crowded and far from clean'

"I'll tell you the same thing I told our state senators in a letter I sent all of them. I have worked at Columbia Park for more than 13 years and have a great interest in the welfare of the residents under my care. The one thing about this situation that bugs me more than anything else is the placement program, or lack of one. As a charge aide I have made some placement trips myself and have felt very unhappy over some of the facilities where my kids have to stay. Many of our residents have been placed in homes that are crowded and far from clean. One was placed in an inside room with no window. Another young girl was placed in a home where the woman of the house was blind and the other family members were retarded, except for the husband who worked many miles away. Many of the facilities have no provision for programs to continue learning experiences for the residents such as we have here at Columbia Park. The Mental Health Division says that it has a waiting list of people who want to open homes. What sort of homes are they? Are they safe? Are they adequately staffed? Do they meet requirements? To give residents the kind of supervision, recreation, training, and physical care given here at Columbia Park would be, I believe, financially impossible for small group homes. My opinions are not influenced by the fact that I would lose my job if Columbia Park is closed. My stand against the closure of this facility stems from my genuine feeling for our people here and a strong conviction that to close it at this point in time would be a great mistake in that the communities are a long way from being ready to accept the mentally retarded." —Ruth Hussey, Psychiatric Aide, May Building

'Most people don't understand the mentally retarded'

"I don't think Columbia Park ought to be closed and I speak from personal experience. I have a mentally retarded daughter who spends one-half of each day here. Believe me, Columbia Park has meant a lot to her. The training she has received has given her a sense of responsibility and taught her some important skills. It has provided her with recreational opportunities and—most important of all—friends. I've worked in private nursing homes and I can tell you they are no place for the mentally retarded. They offer a mentally retarded person very little in terms of care, training, friends and recreation. Most people don't understand the mentally retarded. They are afraid of them. That's one reason why nursing homes and other private placements just don't work out. The mentally retarded need to be with their own kind and they need to be with people who love and understand them. We do at Columbia Park." —Janet Bolton, Laundry Worker, Laundry

'I think it's sad for the kids'

"I think it's sad for the kids. I've heard them express their opinion about the closure and believe me they are

very upset about it. Some of them have even threatened to run away because they don't want to leave. We have an excellent staff here at Columbia Park who are sincerely interested in the welfare of the residents. In addition, we have very good training and activity programs for the residents. I believe in terms of staff and programs Columbia Park is far and away a better facility for the mentally retarded than any other institution in the state. Last but not least closure would have a very serious economic effect upon both employees and the city. We are the second largest payroll in The Dalles. Closure would create a hardship for everyone—residents, employees and The Dalles." —Trudy Weed, Secretary, Clinical Area

'It's heartbreaking to even think of shutting this place down'

"I think it's a dirty shame they are even considering closing this hospital. It won't hurt me, you understand, but it will hurt our residents. Columbia Park is their home. They like it here and they don't want to leave. They get highly disturbed and agitated when they hear they might be moved to Fairview Hospital in Salem or to a group home in the community. It's heartbreaking to even think of shutting this place down. The residents are treated like human beings here, not as mentally retarded persons. The aides take them on picnics, barbecues, movies, fishing—even to the ice follies in Portland. It is a wonderful home for them and it would be a damn shame to shut it down." —Vernon Green, Institution Worker, Dietary Department

'Our kids are my biggest concern'

"I'm concerned because I don't believe enough thought has been given to where our residents will be placed if Columbia Park is closed. Apparently some will be sent to Fairview Hospital in Salem and some will be placed in community group homes. I'm opposed to sending our residents to Fairview because they will not get the high level of care and individual attention they get here. I'm not opposed to placing mentally retarded persons in group homes provided they meet certain standards. The fact of the matter, however, is that there are very few such group homes in existence. Apparently the legislature is making plans to place our residents into community group homes that do not—as of now—exist. That's pretty bad planning. If these group homes existed, and if they could show me that the residents would be given the supervision and training they get here, I certainly wouldn't be opposed to the closure. Our kids are my biggest concern. I'm certainly not concerned about my job because I can always work somewhere else." —Alice Boyd, Registered Nurse, May Building

'Columbia Park is one of the finest I've seen'

"I've been at Columbia Park only a short time, but I have worked in the field of mental retardation in Canada and I've seen many different facilities for the mentally retarded. Columbia Park is one of the finest I've seen. Unfortunately, most of the facilities for the mentally retarded are large, impersonal institutions. Columbia Park is different. It offers residents familial living conditions. They are given much more personal freedom. Living quarters are smaller and more comfortable. The hospital is located in a beautiful, natural environment. The weather is good and there is a minimum of automobile traffic. Those qualities of life and living are important to all of us, including the mentally retarded." —Dr. Peter Taubenberger, Physician, Clinical Area

'It just doesn't make sense to close Columbia Park'

"Every year for at least the past 10 years we've had threats of budget cutbacks. It seems as though we've always worked with that cloud over us. The proposed closure is the most severe so far, but I'm very optimistic that it won't take place. It just doesn't make sense to close Columbia Park. It won't save money because our residents have to be housed somewhere. I've seen some of the private placements. Some are beautiful. But some are abominable places that offer nothing for the residents to do but sit and wait to die. We have programs that have gotten results from mentally retarded persons no one would have thought possible. In terms of what we are accomplishing here at Columbia Park the closure just doesn't make sense." —Robert Carsner, Psychiatric Aide, Pritchett Cottage

'Most residents object to leaving the hospital'

"I used to spend a good deal of my time at work transporting residents to private placements in local communities, such as nursing and foster homes, and homes for the aged. On a number of occasions I was not satisfied with some of the places I had to leave our residents. In fact, I left some of them with real misgivings. Many times I've had them stand at the front door and cry and beg me not to leave them. It just tore me up, but what could I do? It wasn't my decision to make. Most residents object to leaving the hospital, but they aren't given any choice. I've also seen them return to Columbia Park from these community placements. I've seen residents who just a short time earlier were trained, talkative and happy come back uncommunicative and unhappy. Many times the work and effort put into training our kids just goes down the drain when they are put into a community placement. I strongly oppose closing Columbia Park until there are adequate, decent community facilities in which to place our residents." —Bill Wright, Psychiatric Aide, Heath Building

'It would be a crime to close this facility'

"First of all I want you to understand I don't give a damn about losing my job. What I do care about are my residents. I've worked here eight years and I can tell you the kids in this cottage do as much for me as I do for them. They give me love and affection. They boost my spirit. My husband is very ill and we're having a pretty tough time of it. But when I come to work these kids help ease that strain. Last year we got a group of children from Fairview Hospital in Salem. They were considered untrainable. Now, however, they are practically trained. Their behavior problems are practically over. And their parents are delighted with their progress. I think the progress these children have made is representative of what we do here at Columbia Park. It would be a crime to close this facility. I could care less about what is going to happen to us as employees or the loss of a big payroll for The Dalles. I'm concerned about these kids. If the state needs the money it will save from closing our hospital so damn badly I'll gladly forego my July 1 pay raise. That's the way I feel about it. We've had children who couldn't walk, talk, dress or undress themselves. Now they can. We have taught them to do it. I don't want to see that go down the drain. We love these kids. The legislature cannot and should not try to put a price tag on that." —Jo Anne Jewell, Psychiatric Aide, Pritchett Cottage

'With a lot of work and patience and love we've taught them how to talk'

"It really would be a shame to close the hospital. The kids are happy here, they receive excellent care, and I don't know how it would help them or the state by placing them elsewhere, whether it be another institution or a community placement facility such as a nursing home or a foster home. We've had kids transferred here who couldn't even talk. But with a lot of work and patience and love we've taught them how to talk and how to get along in what must be to them a difficult and confusing world. I remember one boy in particular. He was so withdrawn he wouldn't communicate. But we spent a lot of time working with him and talking to him and he finally responded. I don't think that effort would be made elsewhere. He probably would have gone through life withdrawn and uncommunicative. It was interesting to me to observe the reaction of the residents when the closure was announced. Nearly every one of them is opposed to it, and nearly every one of them has in one way or another made their displeasure known. Many of them think of the closure as punishment for something they have done. Isn't that sad? —Betty Alford, Cook, Dietary Department

'They don't get the care they get here'

"I oppose the closure because whenever our residents are placed in community group homes they are taken advantage of. They don't get the care, the training, or the recreational opportunities they get here. I've seen a lot of them go out on private placements and later return and be mighty happy to get back." —Roberta Wake, Institution Worker, Dietary Department

'Dollars shouldn't be the prime consideration'

"It's difficult for me to compare Columbia Park with other institutions for the mentally retarded, so I don't know if our facility is the best. But I do know visitors tell me this facility is a happy, cheerful place. I think we've developed a good staff of employees to care for the residents and good programs to train them. The main reason I've heard given for closure is the saving of money, but I don't understand how the state can save much money because the residents have to be provided for wherever they are placed. Dollars shouldn't be the prime consideration anyway. The most important consideration should be the love, understanding and good care the residents get here." —Marjorie Foster, Caseworker, Social Service Department

'I sure would hate to see it end'

"Closure of this hospital would be a sad day in the lives of our residents. It would bring an end to some excellent training programs for the mentally retarded. For example, female residents have been housed in Hamilton Hall for the past 20 years. Two months ago we began a new coeducational living program designed to teach residents to live together. It's been

both challenging and fascinating. All of the aides became personally involved in the program because they were anxious to make it a success. All aides on all three shifts became totally committed to making this program work. And they did. In two months we taught mentally retarded adult males and females to cohabitate. I think the program did as much for the aides as it did for the residents. Such programs make our work much more meaningful—much more than just working eight hours for a paycheck. I sure would hate to see it end." —Patricia Miller, Psychiatric Aide, Hamilton Hall

'I was shocked when I heard about the closure'

"I was shocked when I heard about the closure. A lot of thoughts went through my mind. My first thought was how the closure would affect the large number of employees—including my father—who have worked here for years and are so close to retirement. My next thought was for the residents. Our resident population is only slightly greater than the total staff. That has permitted us to give them personal attention and care. I visited Fairview Hospital in Salem during my orientation when I went to work for the state. After Columbia Park, it impressed me as a large, im-

personal institution. I think the closure will hurt the economy of The Dalles. Actually, disastrous would probably be a better word for it. As soon as I heard about the closure, I requested a transfer to Dammasch State Hospital in the valley. It's located near Mt. Hood Community College where I plan to attend school." —Pat Carey, Psychiatric Aide, Hamilton Hall

'Closing the hospital will make it difficult for all employees'

"I've worked here only four months. I had a barber shop in Portland for 14 years. I sold my home and moved to The Dalles with the idea of working here until I retire. Now it looks like those plans will have to be changed. Closing the hospital will make it difficult for all employees, especially the older career employees who have worked here for many years and who own their homes and have roots in the community. Many of them will incur financial losses if the hospital is closed. So far I haven't heard of any plans to transfer employees to other state institutions. Don't get me wrong. I'm not bitter or anything. I just wish I would have known about the closure before I sold my business and home and moved to The Dalles." —Alton Greenwood, Barber, Barber Shop

Opposition Voiced to Closure of Columbia Park

A subcommittee of the legislature's powerful Joint Ways and Means Committee that recommended closure of Columbia Park Hospital and Training Center in The Dalles spent nearly two hours recently listening to testimony from persons who oppose the closure.

The capital construction subcommittee, which includes all members of the full committee, held a public hearing in Salem on a bill to close the institution for the mentally retarded on June 30, 1975—the end of the biennium.

Testimony opposing the closure came from employees and the superintendent of Columbia Park Hospital, two legislators from Hood River, some relatives of mentally retarded residents of the institution, the mayor of The Dalles and president of the city's chamber of commerce and an official of the Oregon Association of Retarded Children.

C.W. Palmateer, superintendent of the institution, told lawmakers one factor which might influence their decision to close Columbia Park is whether or not the hospital can continue to place residents in "community living situations" at the current rate. He claimed it cannot.

"So far this biennium we have placed about 155 persons out in the community," he said. "As our more capable residents leave, those left behind are not as well suited for this change."

He pointed out the fact that the institution's rate of placement failures had increased from 11 per cent in the first year to 18 per cent so far this year.

"We know from our discussions with the Public Welfare Division's branch offices that placement of the retarded is a difficult process," Palmateer said. "Very few places actually welcome them; many places are not interested at all. Some will accept a few provided the resident meets certain criteria which makes them 'acceptable.'"

Palmateer disagreed with estimates made during earlier hearings by the subcommittee that closure of Columbia Park would save some \$2.7 million during the 1975-77 biennium. He outlined three reasons why he disagreed with the estimate:

(1) It does not take into consideration money the state receives from the federal government for the services Columbia Park provides its mentally retarded residents, (2) Closure of Columbia Park assumes transfer of residents to Fairview Hospital and Training Center in Salem and that would increase Fairview's operating budget, and (3) It will cost the state an estimated \$300,000 a biennium to maintain Columbia Park Hospital even if it is shut down.

"We can't see how Columbia Park's closure would save \$2.7 million during the 1975-77 budget period," Palmateer said. "We don't cost the state that much now. Opening up Fairview and maintenance of this property would further erode any expected savings. If the population decline slows, we may still have more residents in the system than space to accommodate them if Columbia Park is to be closed."

Two employees who traveled to Salem from The Dalles to protest the closure were Arlene Warren, a



Opposition to closure of Columbia Park Hospital in The Dalles was voiced to this subcommittee of the Joint Ways and Means Committee at a public hearing in Salem June 11. Legislators pictured are Sen. Betty Roberts (D-Portland), Arthur Wilkinson, legislative fiscal staff member, Rep. Stafford Hansell (R-Hermiston), and William McCoy (D-Portland). Rep. Grace Peck (D-Portland), sitting next to McCoy, is not a member of the subcommittee but was invited to join its members after she testified against closing the institution.

psychiatric aide, and Ethelyn McCoy, a therapy aide.

"Columbia Park is a small institution and because of this we feel we have been better able to provide the personal attention and training that our residents are entitled to—not because they are mentally retarded, but because they are individuals," she said.

She told legislators pre-community placement training is given residents each day on each work shift. "It consists of all phases of self-care including eating, bathing, bed making, tooth brushing, dressing and so forth. The training programs at Columbia Park have been successful. We have records to prove our success."

She said the institution also offers residents recreational programs such as fishing and camping trips, picnics, ballgames and trips to the Portland airport and zoo.

Ethelyn McCoy outlined the academic, perceptual-motor and physical education classes offered to the institution's residents. Goals of those classes, she said, are to help residents increase their knowledge, skills and attitudes.

"Students with I.Q.'s ranging from 65 downward are classed as non-educable," she said. "But with the marked progress that has been made by these students we know this to be an untruth. And we know that in the event our facility is left open they will continue to progress."

She told the lawmakers "it would be nothing less than criminal" to place or transfer residents to

facilities that have inferior learning programs or that have no way of developing the mentally retarded to their full potential.

Among the legislators who testified were Sen. Kenneth Jernstedt (R-Hood River) and Rep. Paul Walden (R-Hood River). Jernstedt said he was "amazed at the number of letters I've received opposing closure of the hospital." He said it was a "fine institution" and should be kept open.

Rep. Walden told the subcommittee that closure of Columbia Park Hospital would be "fiscally irresponsible." He recommended closure of the Oregon State Hospital in Salem instead.

Don Smith, mayor of The Dalles, said citizens of his community want the hospital kept open. Columbia Park represents the second largest payroll in the area, he said, and closure would have a great financial impact on the city.

Rep. Stafford Hansell (R-Hermiston), chairman of the subcommittee, responded to the testimony at the end of the two-hour hearing. He told the audience of about 50 that the subcommittee has proceeded under the philosophy that it is better for the mentally retarded to get them out of institutions and into the community.

"It is always hard to close an institution," he said. "Bear with us." He pointed out the fact that Columbia Park is not scheduled for closure until two years from now. In the meantime, he noted, another session of the legislature will be held.