

State must shut developmental centers

By ROBERT STACK

Bernard Krakosky is a state employee. He owns his own condominium in Mercer County. At one time, he lived in a state institution. He is an example of what a person with a disability can accomplish given the opportunity. He has become independent and been able to live life to the fullest.

This is not a right afforded to the approximately 3,000 people currently residing in one of the seven developmental centers in New Jersey. These are individuals who can live in the community and flourish in the community, yet they are confined to these institutions while millions of dollars are wasted keeping them there. This is a matter of basic civil rights.

Since the implementation of the current federal regulations in 1988, there has been a major shift in thinking in the field of developmental disabilities. New Jersey has been slow to abide by the federal mandates of *Olmstead v. L.C.* and the Americans with Disabilities Act, both of which affirmed the right of individuals with disabilities to live

in the community. Under the regulations, states must undertake all reasonable steps necessary to allow people with developmental or mental disabilities to live in the community to the fullest extent possible.

New Jersey developmental centers have received unfavorable ratings by the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services and subsequent investigations by the Department of Justice, citing violations of the Civil Rights of Institutionalized Persons Act. Despite a current settlement agreement, the threat of decertification and attendant loss of federal funding is real, and would be financially catastrophic for New Jersey.

Through various bills that have been proposed in the Legislature, we can rebalance New Jersey's resources by consolidating and closing developmental centers in the state and use the savings to expand community services. This is moving in the right direction.

The average cost for a person living in the developmental center is roughly \$233,000, compared to \$86,000 for a person to live in a

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home in the community. For each person moved from a developmental center to a community-based program, New Jersey can save an average of \$147,000 per person. These savings are more than enough to fund additional community resources and still yield a net profit to New Jersey.

We would save millions of dollars while providing these citizens a better life. While saving millions, the issue of the Community Services Waiting List also could be resolved. The waiting list has almost 8,000 individuals with disabilities waiting for services. That number has nearly doubled in the last decade, and it will continue to grow if we do not begin to invest in community support. Without

proper funding, those on the waiting list are hearing that their only option may be a developmental center. That is not an option.

The rest of the country seems to have it figured out. Across the country, 140 institutions for people with developmental disabilities have closed, with funding reallocated to community-based services. New Jersey has the third-highest rate of institutionalization in the nation, and the second-largest institutional population of people with developmental disabilities — 3,064, according to the state Department of Human Services.

Since 1969, 139 state-operated institutions for people with developmental disabilities have been closed. There are 11 states with no such institutions (Alaska, District of Columbia, Hawaii, Indiana, Maine, Minnesota, New Hampshire, New Mexico, Rhode Island, Vermont and West Virginia). Michigan is scheduled to be the 12th, with its last 61 institutional residents moving into communities by September. There are six other states with fewer than 100 insti-

tutional residents. The national trend is closing costly institutions and investing in community services. New Jersey should follow the lead of these other states.

We are doing a huge disservice to our citizens living in the states' developmental centers. They are people who should be afforded the same rights as any citizen, yet they are confined to institutions, with limited freedom of choice and other rights.

Community Options has participated in institutional closure and community placement of hundreds of people with disabilities throughout the country. We've witnessed firsthand people who have thrived in the community after leaving an institution. They become active members of their community who are gainfully employed. We have seen people who have been tax burdens become taxpayers. We hope to see many more.

Robert Stack is president and CEO of Community Options Inc. in Lacey.

Assurances about tritium leaks not convincing

By PAULA GOTSCH

It's been a crisis month for Exelon since federal regulators jumped the gun and relicensed the Oyster Creek Nuclear Generating Station in Lacey until 2029. Failure of a main transformer led to the shutdown of the reactor earlier this week. That followed the recent discovery of high levels of radioactive tritium contamination at the site.

Nuclear Regulatory Commission staff have tracked the tritium leak to two burst pipes from the reactor. Concentrations of radioactive tritium are up to 300 times the allowable levels in four test wells at the site. This raises alarm about the plant's aging management program, which was the basis of the reli-

community by crossing a public right of way.

We still do not know the outcome of an incident in October when the state Department of Environmental Protection considered a fine against Exelon for failure to report tritium in storm drains. The plant management was content to say it was probably a mistake made by laboratory workers. But, as Dr. Jill Lipoti of the state Department of Environmental Protection's Bureau of Nuclear Engineering made clear, we will never know if a lab error was made or not. Workers dumped the water that had been tested before further analysis could be done.

Tritium leaks at Oyster Creek are a serious issue for the public. Contrary to reassuring words,

tritium, and the state of Illinois subsequently sued Exelon.

After the gross violation of public safety standards at Braidwood, Exelon had to begin testing for tritium leaks at its other plants. At Dresden, tritium was found in offsite wells 500 times allowable standards. At Exelon's Byron Plant in Illinois, tritium levels were more than four times the federal standards in vaults along pipes that transport waste.

Each day Oyster Creek operates, the public is exposed to continuous doses of low-level radiation. Of all nuclear plants nationwide, Oyster Creek's airborne emissions for Strontium 90 are highest, and they are the second highest for airborne Strontium 89. The plant also emits the second-highest airborne levels of

