

End Warehousing of People with Disabilities  
By: Robert Stack

Seventeen years ago I was an executive assistant and was told to take the then Junior Assemblyman, now a member of Congress, Rodney Frelinghuysen to the Vineland Developmental Center for a tour. His assistant shrieked in horror to see a naked woman (hand, feet and neck) bound to a bed in rags.

Naively I said, "This is your fault". He said, "What do you mean?" I said, "The legislature never appropriates enough money to take care of these folks in a good environment and the staff don't know what to do." Subsequently some of the administrative staff was let go from this facility after an investigation.

That was the Vineland Developmental Center "East Campus". It was not called that in the sixties or the early seventies. The Vineland Developmental Center use to be called "The Vineland Developmental Center for Feeble Minded Women of Child Bearing Age". The campus in those days was not called East and West. They were called the "Main Campus" and "The Colony". Not only were persons with disabilities segregated by sex in those days, but by race as well.

Since then I have devoted all my time advocating that New Jersey needs to move appropriate persons with disabilities into the community to enable institutional staff to deal with people that needed more intensive care. Governor Florio closed the Johnstone Training and Research Center. Governor Whitman closed the North Princeton Developmental Center.

New Jersey still remains the second largest institutionally populated state in the country, second only to Texas. There are 17 states without any developmental centers. Michigan will close their last one this summer. The reasons they are closing are because they morally wrong and too costly.

The NJ Division of Developmental Disabilities supports over 25,000 people with a budget of \$1.3 billion. More than a half a billion is allocated for the 2,800 people living in the 7 institutions. Governor Whitman told me that closing the institution with public perception for fear of change, job loss and not to mention the shear logistics was one of the most difficult things she had done in her career. No Governor, with the exception of Chris Christie had the fortitude or the vision to make such a difficult but morally correct decision. Sure it will save money, but it will also help transfer some of the people out of facilities who should have left years ago a reality. His decision portrays a man that says when you have lemons such as huge deficits, make lemonade.

The physical plant at the Vineland Developmental Center is in need of so much repair and the employees can be moved to other facilities to reduce overtime and tend to those who need services more. The existing buildings can be used for a detention facility or even a community college or sold to a developer. It is the right thing to do. It is the best thing to do.



This decision is the reflection of a man who is not afraid to stand up and do what is right. It will be a sacrifice. It will be difficult. However, it is a decision that should have been made a long time ago.