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Union urges more use of small units, less of state hospitals

by Robert de la Vega

Another voice was added to those calling for change in the use of institutional care for the state's developmentally disabled when the labor union representing state hospital employees went on record in favor of reducing the proportion of persons cared for in an institutional setting.

The union, after a four-month study, is calling for less hospital use with more of the care provided in smaller facilities. However, the union proposes that those smaller facilities be owned and run by the state and staffed by union employees.

"We understand that the shape of the state hospital system is changing," Tom Beer, lobbyist for AFSCME Council 6, said. "The

status quo serves nobody," he said. It is not in the best interest of workers, care recipients or taxpayers, he added.

Beer said financing mechanisms favor hospital care and not decentralized community care. The union proposed freeing the resources now committed to institutions to allow direct provision of services or provision of support services, he said.

The state could just as easily own and operate group homes, foster care programs, apartment dwellings with support services, and other alternatives to hospital care, he said.

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Beer said the current system is a "non-system" which lacks policy direction. "There is a need for more attention to fiscal considerations," he said. "There is also a quality-of-care question that needs to be looked at."

The current mix of public and private service is not best in either quality or efficiency, he said. Private providers have picked up the easiest-to-care-for patients, leaving the tougher cases for the state, Beer said.

The union's study said the state has lost control of the operations of privately-run facilities and urged state ownership to assure control.

Beer acknowledged the union's self-interest in having the state own and operate alternative care facilities — keeping jobs for its members. Trends for the future are not favorable for the union, he said. If state hospitals are closed, as has happened in the past, workers will lose their jobs, he said.

Workers shouldn't have to lose when new policies are generated, Beer said. "Something has got to happen this legislative session," he said. "Something has got to break."

December 11, 1984
