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Senator hits state plan for mentally ill

By Sam Newlund
Staff Writer

A state senator who heads an advocacy group accused the state Department of Human Services Tuesday of short-changing the mentally ill in its plan to overhaul the state hospital system.

"The mentally ill are still at the bottom of the heap and still taking the worst licks," Sen. Donald Storm, IR-Ediha, told Sandra Gardebring, Human Services commissioner. Storm is executive director of the Minnesota Alliance for the Mentally ILL.

Gardebring, testifying before the Senate Health and Human Services Committee on the overhaul plan, told Storm that sizable amounts of money for community mental health are contained in other departmental proposals and are part of Gov. Rudy Perpich's budget.

The budget has \$3.5 million for children's mental health and \$6 million for adult community programs, Gardebring said later. Storm doubted that much of it would go for additional community residences for the mentally ill.

"We need more community-based services," he said in an interview. "That's why we have the homeless problem — Mi's (mentally ill people) On the street."

Yesterday's hearing was the third in which Gardebring tried to sell the Legislature on the department's six-year plan to reorganize the state's delivery of direct services to the mentally ill, retarded, chemically dependent and the elderly. Bills are yet to be introduced.

The-retarded would see the biggest change under the proposal. All but 95 of the 1,400 retarded residents of seven state hospitals, now called regional centers, would move to community group homes by mid-1995. The hospital in Anoka would be rebuilt,¹ those in Fergus Falls and Moose Lake would be rebuilt or renovated, and oak Terrace Nursing Home in Minnetonka would close.

Storm said the mentally ill were slighted, compared with the retarded, in the department's plan. The plan calls for 105 new state-operated community group homes for the retarded.

Gardebring said a "person-by-person assessment" of each mentally-ill hospital resident will be done by October, to determine where each could best be served. That must precede requests for major funding increases, she said.

She insisted that the community-program money elsewhere in the budget, in addition to \$13 million voted two years ago for the department's "mental health initiative," would bring significant improvements.

The department's plan to move most retarded residents out of state institutions was praised yesterday by the mother of a 37-year-old severely-retarded woman who has made such a move.

Toni Lippert, past president of the Minnesota Association for Persons with Severe Handicaps, told the committee that her daughter "has developed skills we never thought possible" since moving into a series of community placements.

Her daughter has cerebral palsy, epilepsy, a heart condition and minimal ability to communicate, Lippert said. Since leaving the state hospital at Cambridge 12 years ago, she moved into progressively less-restricted facilities. She now lives with a caretaker in a St. Paul apartment.

Lippert said her daughter goes a beauty shop, the bank, takes daily walks, and stops for coffee. Because such normal experiences are unavailable in state hospitals, their residents fail to develop fully their social skills and sense of well-being, according to advocates for community placements.