

State may spend \$292,000 a year to help retarded man

By Sam Newlund
StaffWriter

The state of Minnesota appears ready to spend \$292,000 a year to move a retarded man from a state hospital to a small group home in an effort to stop his compulsive self-injurious behavior.

Since 1983, Michael Untinen, 21, has been given a mild electric shock at

Faribault Regional Center each time he batters his face, bangs his head on the floor, snaps his neck or inflicts other punishment on himself.

But social service officials are perfecting plans to move him into a four-person group home near the regional center that would be staffed by a number of highly trained people. They would aim at stopping his self-injury with a number of expensive

medical and behavioral techniques. -

The cost would be about \$800 a day, or \$292,000 a year, according to Michael McGraw, developmental disabilities division manager for Hennepin County, Untinen's home county. Agreement is virtually assured among officials of the state Department of Human Services, Hennepin County and Rice County, where the group home would be established

Retarded

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and run by the state, McGraw said Wednesday.

Dwight Maxa, residential program manager in Human Services, said the cost would far exceed spending on any other Minnesota group home resident. But Karen Peed, a department program coordinator, said the inflation-adjusted cost may have been equaled in one or two placements several years ago.

The plan is expected to be presented at a Feb. 24 hearing in Hennepin County District Court when the state will ask the court for authority to continue administering electric shock. The move to the group home would be part of the state's plan to eliminate shock gradually. Under state law, a plan to eliminate it is a condition for a judge to permit its use.

Two years ago the Legislature considered a bill to outlaw the "faradic shock" that Untinen gets, but it passed an amended version that permitted shock when a judge authorized it after a hearing.

Untinen is the only person in the state hospital system known to be receiving faradic shock. It is administered with a hand-held device with electrodes on one end.

In 1987, Sen. John Brandl, author of the bill to outlaw it, called the devices "cattle prods" whose use is "callous and inhumane." Rep. Karen Clark, the House author, called the practice "just barbaric." Both are Minneapolis DFLers.

State officials and behavioral experts said that they, too, would prefer not using shock, but that Untinen's self-battering and other behavior was so persistent and serious that it endangered his life.

By giving him a jolt of electricity each time he did such things as striking himself, gouging his eyes or inducing vomiting, staff people could cut down on such abuse, behavior experts said.

People who have tested the device say shock inflicts discomfort, but not nearly as much as a jolt from a wall socket.

Faradic shock is distinct from electroconvulsive therapy (ETC), which some psychiatrists use to treat depression or other mental disorders. With ETC, a patient is sedated and given a momentary electric current through electrodes attached to the head, producing mild convulsions.

In a court hearing in October 1987, Human Services proposed moving Untinen into a group home near the University of Minnesota Hospital where doctors and behavior experts

could participate in his treatment program and emergency care would be easily available. The plan called for a residential coordinator, two program specialists and four residential teachers. A second patient was to join Untinen in the house after six months.

The residential budget — staff salaries and benefits, rent and utilities — totaled \$223,820. But other costs training in behavioral programming, day activities, health and psychiatric services, for example — would have boosted the total much higher.

Thomas Bennett Wilson III, Untinen's attorney, said the total cost estimated during the earlier hearing approached \$500,000. Wilson said he will demand to know in the Feb. 24 hearing why the department never carried out the plan it recommended.

The high cost and difficulties with funding and program rules got in the way, Human Services officials said yesterday. Now that the Legislature has lifted a moratorium on new community intermediate care facilities for the retarded, new group homes can be established without certain cost restrictions imposed on other kinds of facilities, they said.

McGraw said it was feared that Minneapolis would not allow a group home near the university because it already has more than its share. Employees at Faribault Regional Center are experts on self-injurious behavior and would be the best to staff Untinen's group home, he said.

The projected \$800 daily cost compares with an average of about \$80 for other retarded people in group homes, plus \$35 for outside activity centers, said Human Services program manager Steven Jensen.

Untinen's costs would be paid by Medicaid, which is 53 percent federal money, 42 percent state and 5 percent county. The state would begin reimbursing the county for its 5 percent in July 1990.

Officials said it would take a year to 18 months before arrangements are complete and Untinen could be moved.

Court told electric shock has helped retarded man

By Sam Newlund
Staff Writer

The use of mild electric shock brought a 99 percent reduction in self-battering by a 21-year-old mentally retarded man at the Faribault Regional Center, a therapist testified Friday in Hennepin County District Court.

Behavior analyst Tom Chamberlain said the use of "faradic shock," a mild jolt of electricity administered by a hand-held device, reduced the number of times that Michael Untinen battered himself from an average of more than 351 per hour to less than two.

Untinen is believed to be the only state hospital resident to have received faradic shock. Two years ago the Legislature rejected a bill to outlaw the procedure on grounds that it was inhumane, but passed a law requiring a court hearing before shock is used.

Two weeks ago, a Hennepin County official said a plan to reduce and eventually eliminate the use of shock on Untinen would cost \$800 a day, or \$292,000 a year. That plan involved placing Untinen in a Faribault group home with three other people.

Robert York, an assistant state commissioner of Human Services, said in an interview Friday that the figure was somewhat high, but he said he couldn't estimate the true amount.

It also was unclear how much the state spends on Untinen at the center in Faribault, Minn., but York said it wouldn't approach \$800 a day. The average per-day cost in such institutions is less than \$195, he said. On the witness stand Friday, York said a plan devised a year ago to place Untinen in a home near the University of Minnesota was rejected because its cost of more than \$700 a day was excessive.

Some experts say a move to a community group home is an important part of any plan to reduce Untinen's self-injury. They hope a more normal environment with opportunities for a variety of activities might divert him from whatever causes his self-injurious behavior.

Chamberlain told Judge Patricia Belois Friday that if shock were discontinued suddenly, Untinen would revert to his previous state, in which he had to be strapped down in leather restraints and forced to wear a helmet to protect his head from self-injury.