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## News

# New psychiatric care centers lack wide-open spaces of Mayview

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By Joe Fahy, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

For local residents who need lengthy psychiatric care, the most likely option is no longer Mayview State Hospital, but a locked unit at Western Psychiatric Institute and Clinic.

Patients who might have strolled alone around Mayview's aging buildings and spacious grounds are instead being sent to Western Psychiatric's 30-bed extended acute care unit, part of a 289-bed inpatient complex. Patients can't leave the unit on their own during their stays, but can participate in supervised outings. Most stay about six months.

The lengthy stays in the congested heart of the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center's Oakland campus have raised concerns from some advocates, mindful of the relatively pastoral setting at Mayview.

The care should be provided in smaller facilities "on green property," where patients could earn the right to go out unaccompanied, said Dick Jevon, a volunteer for NAMI Southwestern Pennsylvania. Those settings should be less stressful for patients, said Mr. Jevon, who has a family member with mental illness.

There is plenty of green space at Mayview, which the state Department of Public Welfare plans to close by the end of the year. The sprawling South Fayette hospital is typical of a largely bygone era when most patients were cared for in large institutions, often with expansive grounds.

State officials say they are working to address advocates' concerns, in part by preparing draft guidelines that stipulate patients should have "access to adequate outdoor space."

Western Psychiatric's extended acute care unit, known as the transitional recovery unit, or TRU, opened in August 2006. The unit is the first of its kind in the area, though officials have plans for several others.

They include a facility in Allegheny County of up to 16 beds that won't be based at a hospital.

Plans also call for two other extended care units serving Beaver, Lawrence, Washington or Greene counties, the other counties served by Mayview. One of them would tentatively be based at another hospital, Heritage Valley Beaver.

Three other extended acute care units operate in the Harrisburg area and two more are in

Philadelphia. They, too, were developed in response to state hospital closings. All but one are in hospitals.

Western Psychiatric's TRU generally doesn't serve patients leaving Mayview. Most of those patients are moving to group homes or other community settings.

Instead, the unit's patients typically come from acute psychiatric units in community hospitals. They need more care and formerly would have gone to Mayview, which hasn't taken new admissions for non-forensic patients since November. The hospital's forensic unit evaluates and treats people in the criminal justice system.

Officials acknowledged certain advantages in creating the hospital-based extended care units.

Hospitals offer a ready source of inpatient psychiatric beds. Psychiatric and other medical care are readily available. And opening a new unit is unlikely to prompt the not-in-my-back-yard neighborhood response that often accompanies the planned opening of community-based facilities serving people with mental illness.

Officials emphasized that extended acute care involves active treatment aimed at getting patients back to community living as soon as possible.

"I don't know many who would say, 'Mayview is nicer,' " said Joan Erney, deputy secretary for the state Office of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services.

Still, patients there have more independence in some ways than those at the TRU.

Of 178 patients still at Mayview early last month who were not in the forensic unit, 106 were allowed to go out unsupervised on the hospital grounds. Among other activities, they could take walks and visit the drop-in center, the library, the gift shop or "various gazebos and green spaces on the property," said Stacey Witalec, a welfare department spokeswoman.

Officials know of six patients since 2006 who left the hospital property while on grounds privileges. All were returned "without any serious consequences," she said.

Ms. Erney acknowledged that lengthy hospitalization in extended acute care units could be challenging for patients, but said the state hopes to keep average stays to about six months.

"Nothing in the immediate future" suggests the state will close its other seven hospitals for people with mental illness, she said.

Kimberly Owens, Western Psychiatric's vice president for inpatient and emergency services, said officials have worked hard to compensate for the TRU's lack of green space.

Unlike patients on short-term psychiatric units, where the average stay is 15 days, patients in extended acute care are encouraged to go out for daily walks, movies and other outings, including picnics in warm weather, she said.

"Many times, I'm driving home and I see some of our folks walking down the street, just going for a walk in Oakland."

Patients also go on supervised outings outside Oakland and can receive passes for overnight

visits with relatives, or at the group homes or other community settings where they may live once they're released.

Staff members also work with patients to help them learn community living skills like using an automatic teller machine, shopping and money management. The unit's staff includes several "peers" -- others with mental illness who can provide support and guidance to patients.

Demand for the unit's services has been strong since it opened with nine beds, then expanded to 15 beds last summer, Dr. Owens said.

"In January, at the county's and state's request, we expanded to the 30 beds and began taking referrals from other counties," she said.

"We filled the beds within a week and we're back to having a waiting list now."

Officials for some extended acute care units attributed their lengthy stays, in part, to a shortage of community housing options for people with mental illness.

In Philadelphia, as at Western Psychiatric, the two extended care units remain full, with waiting lists. They were developed in response to the closure of Philadelphia State Hospital in 1990.

Three other extended care units were opened in response to the closing of Harrisburg State Hospital in 2006.

Philhaven, a nonprofit behavioral health service agency, opened a 12-bed extended acute care facility in Lebanon County in July 2005 that has since increased to 16 beds, said Jennifer Miller, nurse manager. Patients have recreational opportunities and can go out on the hospital grounds on their own if they are close to being released.

Holy Spirit Hospital in Camp Hill opened its extended acute care unit in November 2005, said Frank Mirillo, clinical operations coordinator for the hospital's behavioral health center. Patients in the 12-bed unit can go outside for recreation or outings with a staff person present, he said. The average length of stay is three months.

The state's first non-hospital-based extended acute care unit opened in York County in July 2006. The 16-bed facility, located in a converted warehouse along with an outpatient clinic and a crisis diversion residential service, is staffed by nurses, therapists, a part-time physician and other mental health professionals. The unit works with two local hospitals to meet patients' other medical needs.

Patients can take advantage of an exercise room, vocational training, an arts and crafts area equipped with a kiln, and a vegetable garden and greenhouse, said Lindy Coder, regional director of project development for NHS Human Services, developer and operator of the facility. They also can go on community outings.

The average length of stay is about seven months, though one patient stayed a year and five months, officials said.

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