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## Opinion

### Issue One: Mayview Downsizing

Sunday, November 25, 2007

Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

#### Some don't do well

For many years, I was an attorney with the Pennsylvania Department of Public Welfare. Among other duties, I represented the commonwealth's mental health and mental retardation facilities. I was not involved in policy but watched as Dixmont State Hospital, Woodville State Hospital and Western Center were closed and hundreds of patients and residents were placed in the community.

So it was with great interest that I read your front-page article concerning Mayview State Hospital ("Mayview Suspends Downsizing: Death of Ex-Patient Causes Concern Over Discharges, Second Ex-Patient Also Killed," Nov. 19).

Talk about "damning with faint praise": The statement from Mary Fleming, chief executive officer of Allegheny HealthChoices, that "many are doing well in the community" is chilling. She was referring to about 80 recent discharges from Mayview. How many of these 80 are not doing well? Should they not have been discharged? Should they be recommitted? What is the Allegheny HealthChoices organization doing about those who are not doing well? What does "doing well" mean?

It seems to me that some individuals need the care that can be given only in an institution. Hopefully, the tragic deaths of the two former Mayview patients will allow the commonwealth officials time to reconsider the drive to close all state hospitals and centers.

**EDWARD P. CAREY**  
Scott

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#### Temporary halt

It is with great sadness that I read of two former Mayview State Hospital patients' deaths. I guarantee that these problems are only the tip of the iceberg.

For over a year, I have been a very vocal advocate against the Pennsylvania Office of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services' rush to close Mayview without adequate outpatient services in place. The problem stems from our area's huge outpatient service deficits, which

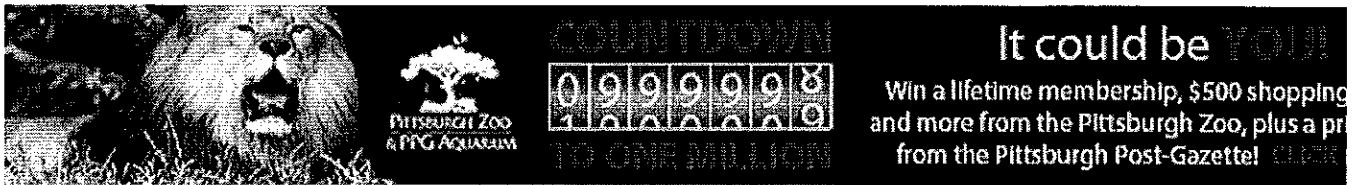
will not be cured by the amount of cash that the state wants to infuse back in the local systems.

Dr. Fred Markowitz in the journal *Criminology*, Volume 44, No. 1 (2006), shows that the state's plan to use extended acute care beds will not change the documented increase in homelessness and criminalization of our most ill clients. Pennsylvania OMHSAS says it wants recovery in the community. But for many, this translates into more restrictive long-term structured residences, homelessness, jails and needless deaths.

I believe the current moratorium will be temporary. Then the state will chip away at Mayview until the beds are too few to be practical. After meeting with people from Pennsylvania OMHSAS and speaking with several politicians, I feel the only way the state will change the current plan is because of a lawsuit. A successful litigation is the only thing I have on my list to Santa Claus this year!

**SUZANNE VOGEL-SCIBILIA, M.D.**  
Beaver County Psychiatric Services  
Beaver

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## Neighborhoods

### Mayview resumes discharges after moratorium

Friday, November 23, 2007

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Discharges from Mayview State Hospital have resumed after a temporary moratorium of a few days brought on by concerns about patient safety, according to a state Department of Public Welfare spokeswoman.

The program of moving patients from the hospital into community living situations was resumed Monday, said the spokeswoman, Stacey Witalec.

The stoppage, she said, was "to ensure we were providing appropriate support for people as they move into the community."


Two former Mayview patients have died in separate incidents since being discharged.

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## Opinion

# Mayview's lost: A suspension in the downsizing makes sense

Wednesday, November 21, 2007

Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

Give the state welfare department credit for imposing a temporary moratorium on the downsizing of Mayview State Hospital.

Two recent deaths of former patients living in the community have prompted officials to re-examine health services meant to support those coping with mental illness in neighborhood settings.

The Department of Public Welfare faced criticism when it announced in August that it planned to close Allegheny County's last state mental hospital by the end of 2008. That downsizing, which will affect 225 patients, was under way when two former residents, Anthony Fallert and Ahson J. Abdullah, died in the last few weeks.

Mr. Fallert, who had been released from Mayview in spring 2006, died after plunging off the Birmingham Bridge into the Monongahela River on Oct. 29. Mr. Abdullah was struck by a train in Braddock on Nov. 5.

While deinstitutionalization enables more Americans with mental illness to live their lives in more normal settings, it must be done with the utmost care and attention to their medical and social needs. Pennsylvania has reduced its mental hospitals from 21 serving 10,573 residents in the late 1970s, to nine hospitals serving 2,000 today. That huge transformation hasn't been without its costs, both financial and human.

That's why it's worth suspending the Mayview transition to learn what, if anything, might have been done differently for two former patients who were lost.

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## News

# Mayview suspends downsizing in wake of ex-patient's death

**Fatality raises concern over discharges; second ex-patient also killed**

Monday, November 19, 2007

By Joe Fahy and Torsten Ove, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette



Darrell Sapp / Post-Gazette

James Fallert kisses the urn holding the ashes of his nephew, Anthony Fallert, at a memorial service Wednesday at Living Word Ministry on the North Side.

State officials have temporarily halted the downsizing of Mayview State Hospital following the recent death of a former patient in a plunge from the Birmingham Bridge.

A second ex-patient, released from a Mayview forensic unit, used to evaluate and treat people in the criminal justice system, also was killed recently when he was struck by a train.

Stacey Witalec, a Department of Public Welfare spokeswoman, said the state is conducting reviews of two recent "sentinel events" involving former Mayview patients, such as unexplained deaths or serious injuries. Officials would not comment specifically on the two deaths.

Ms. Witalec called the temporary moratorium on hospital discharges "a precautionary measure" to ensure that proper services are available to meet the needs of patients placed in the community.

Officials plan to close Allegheny County's last state hospital for people with mental illnesses at the end of next year, and downsizing of the hospital has been under way for months.

Authorities believe Anthony Fallert, who had schizophrenia, walked away from a community mental health program on Ninth Street in the South Side on Oct. 29 and jumped or fell from the Birmingham Bridge.



Anthony Fallert

Police said the program did not report him missing until the following day, his 24th birthday. His body was pulled from the Monongahela River on Nov. 5. The Allegheny County medical examiner's office said the cause of death was drowning.

On the same day Mr. Fallert's body was found in the river, Ahson J. Abdullah, 58, a father of six who had been in and out of jail over the years, was struck by a train near his home in Braddock.

He was a former patient in Mayview's forensic unit, which is also slated for closure. State officials want to provide forensic services at other locations around the state.

A videotape from the train's engine showed Mr. Abdullah stumbling around on the tracks before the train struck him.

The Allegheny County homicide squad is awaiting toxicology tests to determine if he was intoxicated, and the medical examiner's office has yet to rule on a manner of death.

His wife, Sarah, could not be reached last week.

"Everybody involved in the Mayview process is very saddened to hear someone has died, and we take it very seriously," said Mary Fleming, chief executive officer of Allegheny HealthChoices, which is developing a plan to improve behavioral health care in the five-county area served by Mayview.

Officials will try to use information from such cases to improve services, Ms. Fleming said. She noted that about 80 non-forensic patients have been discharged from Mayview through the downsizing process, and "many are doing well in the community."

Officials said Mr. Fallert was released from Mayview in the spring of 2006. He later lived in a group facility in Clarion County, his family said, and also lived at his mother's home in Allentown and at a program in New Kensington before he moved to a South Side facility operated by Mercy Behavioral Health.

Mercy Behavioral officials declined to comment on the case, citing confidentiality concerns. But Kimberly Flaherty, a Mercy Behavioral spokeswoman, said an unlocked, 16-bed facility for adults is among the programs that operate at 264 S. Ninth St., South Side.

Mr. Fallert was last seen at the facility at 9 a.m. Oct. 29, according to police, and Mercy Behavioral officials didn't report him missing until about 4 p.m. the next day.

They said they delayed because they presumed he had left to celebrate his birthday, according to police.

The case was referred to the missing persons unit, which contacted Mr. Fallert's mother, Susan Williams. Police issued a bulletin and released his picture, which was broadcast on KDKA-TV.

But detectives now believe he plunged from the Birmingham Bridge within an hour of leaving the Mercy Behavioral facility because fishermen under the bridge said they heard a splash in the water at about 10 a.m.

Ms. Williams said her son had talked to her by phone before he disappeared and told her he felt suicidal and homicidal. She wondered why he wasn't more closely supervised, noting he had had past suicide attempts.

At her son's memorial service last week, the Rev. David Lee, pastor of Living Word Ministry church on the North Side, encouraged Mr. Fallert's family and friends to remember the good times they had with him.

"We do thank God for what Anthony has meant in our lives," the pastor said.

At the end of the service, friends and family members embraced near a display that included photos and an urn containing his ashes.

"He was so young," his mother said.

Joe Fahy can be reached at [jfahy@post-gazette.com](mailto:jfahy@post-gazette.com) or 412-263-1722. Torsten Ove can be reached at [tove@post-gazette.com](mailto:tove@post-gazette.com) or 412-263-1510.

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