

LAWMAKER: CLOSE IT

Close Children's Facility, A Top GOP Lawmaker Urges

By CHRISTOPHER KEATING | *The Hartford Courant*

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CROMWELL — - With its budget deficit ballooning, the state should shut down the Riverview psychiatric hospital for children because — at \$862,000 per child per year — it is too expensive to operate, the Senate Republican leader said Wednesday.

Sen. [John McKinney](#) of Fairfield said the state should send Riverview's patients to private hospitals in order to save money in tough economic times. The children could be treated at much lower cost at places like [Yale-New Haven Hospital](#), the Institute of Living in Hartford and Natchaug Hospital in Mansfield, he said.

Riverview, operated by unionized state employees for the state Department of Children and Families, is the only state-run children's psychiatric hospital in New England.

"The state should get out of that business," McKinney told mayors and first selectmen gathered in a hotel ballroom for a morning conference. "We would save millions of dollars."

McKinney was speaking at the annual legislative forum for the Connecticut Council of Small Towns, which represents 120 municipalities that have populations below 30,000. The mayors and town leaders are concerned about their state funding as the state struggles to balance its own budget. Connecticut is just starting to grapple with a budget deficit that is projected to be \$922 million in the current fiscal year and as high as \$8 billion to fund current services over the following two fiscal years.

Senate Majority Leader Martin Looney, a [New Haven](#) Democrat who appeared on the panel with McKinney, said in an interview that he was not yet convinced that Riverview could be closed.

"It's an essential service," Looney said. "There are certain services in which the state is the default provider — in bad times and good."

But Jeanne Milstein, the state child advocate, who monitors Riverview at the request of Gov. M. [Jodi Rell](#), agreed with McKinney. Both Milstein and McKinney acknowledge that the closure could not be done overnight and would occur only after extensive planning to find alternatives for the young patients, who have acute psychiatric disorders that include schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, psychosis and severe depression.

Riverview is "an outdated, institutional setting," Milstein said in an interview. The problems of Connecticut's children are no more severe than those of children in [Massachusetts](#), [New Hampshire](#) or [Maine](#), she said, and none of those states runs its own psychiatric hospital for children.

The private Institute of Living cares for children at an annual cost ranging up to \$365,000 per year — less than half the cost at Riverview, she said.

A spokesman for DCF, however, said that children are not admitted to Riverview unless they have already been treated at another acute, in-patient psychiatric hospital and have not shown improvement.

"Riverview is currently the only entity providing this level of service in Connecticut," Gary Kleeblatt, the spokesman, said.

When asked about McKinney's proposal to close Riverview, Rell's spokesman, Christopher Cooper, said, "The governor is committed to working with the legislature to find ways to provide all state services in the most cost-effective manner possible."

State officials have argued for months over exactly how much it costs to run Riverview, which sits on a bluff overlooking the [Connecticut River](#) in [Middletown](#). Regardless of how the calculations are made, the costs are very high.

State Comptroller Nancy Wyman and Milstein cite the \$862,000 annual price tag per child that is based on an annual \$43.5 million budget in the 2007 fiscal year. This figure includes fringe benefits for Riverview's staff of mostly unionized state employees.

DCF, however, says it costs \$492,000 per child, which does not include benefits. DCF says there is an average of 70 children at the hospital on any given day, while Milstein says the average is about 60 children.

The hospital is a labor-intensive facility that provides services 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. There are 297 full-time staff members, 145 part-time and 18 per diem workers, including nurses, psychologists, psychiatrists, rehabilitation therapists and social workers.

Any possible cuts at Riverview would be made in the context of a quickly weakening economy that has led to a collapse in state tax revenue. Since many investors lost money last year, the state income tax collected on capital gains has largely dried up. At the end of 2008, the collection of income tax from those who file quarterly payments dropped by 20 percent. Those taxpayers include the state's wealthiest residents, who receive substantial amounts of income from capital gains and dividends related to large stock-and-bond portfolios.

Cuts for the current fiscal year must be made as soon as possible, McKinney said, in order to save as much as possible. If the General Assembly waits too long in the current fiscal year, McKinney says, there will be only two options left: raising taxes and raiding the state's \$1.4 billion "rainy day fund" for fiscal emergencies.

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