

## **Our Leaders Fail The Neediest At Southbury Training SchoolX**

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The painful cost of government without leadership is on full display in a federal courtroom in New Haven, where advocates are demanding that the state dramatically change how it cares for our aging population of intellectually disabled citizens.

Taxpayers spend an average of about \$350,000 annually on each of the 450 residents at the Southbury Training School, a sprawling and isolated institution drawn from another century.

State leaders have known since a 2008 court decision in the long-running Messier v. Southbury Training School case that the facility violates federal law. Instead of innovation, Gov. M. Jodi Rell's administration has spent hundreds of thousands of dollars fighting reformers in court. We will pay dearly for this.

"There can be little disagreement that having the right to choose between institutionalization and community placement will benefit" the disabled, U.S. District Judge Ellen Bree Burns wrote in one of her rulings in the Messier case.

In 2010, it is an undisputed fact that even the most severely mentally and physically disabled can live in community-based settings. Advocates say this can be done for about \$122,000 a year. In the past decade, only a relative handful of residents have moved out of Southbury.

You cannot blame the hard-working, caring workers of Southbury for this travesty. I have visited the aging campus, where director Eugene Harvey and a committed staff of about 1,500 toil admirably and creatively to meet the needs of residents who have made the patched-up rural campus of brick buildings home for decades.

It is a frozen-in-time existence, where residents — on average, in their early 60s — live with fading memories of long-departed relatives, sometimes represented only by yellowing pictures in frames on bedroom bureaus. It cannot be overstated that Southbury is the only real home many of these people have ever known.

Often, Southbury staff are residents' closest — and only — confidants. Few have left since advocates for the disabled first sued the state in 1994. In one case, 114 residents, through a foundation, are represented by a single guardian.

The state has argued that residents don't want to leave, and there's some truth there. It's easy to understand this when an alternative hasn't been offered, let

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alone explained.

Since 1999, just 48 Southbury residents have moved into community-based group homes. Advocates for the disabled say that hundreds more could have been relocated if the state had created a better system of creating group homes that could handle Southbury residents, many of whom have both physical and mental disabilities.

Certainly, for some there might be no other option. But we must ask why this 1950s-era model for segregated care of the disabled has been allowed to persist.

"You have to have leadership to make this change," David Shaw, a lawyer for groups representing the disabled, including the Arc of Connecticut, told me in court this week. "It really presents a very entrenched problem that it is going to be difficult to deal with. This case ended 10 years ago and nothing has changed."

Instead, long after the infamous closure of the Mansfield Training School, Southbury lives on.

The ghost of former Gov. John Rowland hangs heavy over all of this mess. It was under our former leader that policies abruptly changed in 1995 and 1996 from moving residents back into the community to preserving a world that I thought existed only in film documentaries.

Rowland was responding to pressure from families and staff, fearful that Southbury would close, like Mansfield. It's astonishing that this transparent political move would infect state policies for years to come.

Two years after she ruled that Southbury violated federal discrimination laws when it "failed adequately to provide" for "community placement," Judge Burns is now hearing from lawyers about what the state should do to try to move more residents into communities.

The state Department of Developmental Services, which operates Southbury, has declined to comment about the case while the court is considering a remedy.

"There is no reason why people with complex needs cannot be placed in the community," Sue Gant, an expert witness for the plaintiffs who has overseen efforts in other states to de-institutionalize the disabled, told Judge Burns this week. Responding to questions about whether some Southbury residents are too severely disabled to leave Southbury, Gant said, "There is no systematic way of identifying individuals who are appropriate for community placement."

"Everyone at Southbury could live in the community with the right kinds of supports," Gant said. But unless you educate families and guardians about these options, they will often oppose such a move, she said.

"People can live in communities with all the support they need. There are 12 states without institutions," Lynn Warner, executive director of the Arc of Connecticut, which advocates for people with disabilities, told me. "It's always cheaper."

After more than a decade of waiting, we await a solution from a federal judge.

That's what you get when nobody leads.