Trenton facility to remain open while Hagedorn Psychiatric Hospital closes could lose accreditation

By Tom Rowan Jr. | The Express-Times

A private accreditation commission earlier this month found problems with the physical plant at Trenton Psychiatric Hospital, chosen by Gov. Chris Christie to continue operating instead of a similar facility in Hunterdon County, officials say.

The inspection by the Joint Commission on Accreditation of Healthcare Organizations came weeks after Christie decided to close Senator Garrett W. Hagedorn Psychiatric Hospital in Lebanon Township instead of Trenton.

A 21-person task force earlier this year recommended closing one or the other. Officially, the task force was unable to reach a consensus on which one, despite two votes against closing Hagedorn. Christie made the decision last month to close Hagedorn in June 2012 as part of the fiscal year 2012 budget.

“We made a big point that Trenton Psychiatric is basically dealing with an infrastructure and a superstructure that is upwards of 150 years old,” said task force member Gilbert Honigfeld, a psychologist in West Windsor, N.J.

"These are old, decaying buildings with all the environmental hazards associated with that and it looks like a warehouse, which everyone is trying to avoid,” said Honigfeld, who said his son lost his vision in one eye when he was assaulted at Trenton and is now being treated at Hagedorn. State Sen. Michael Doherty, R-Warren/Hunterdon, who also sat on the task force, said he learned of the accreditation commission’s report Wednesday in talking with New Jersey Department of Human Services Commissioner Jennifer Velez.

Doherty said Velez confirmed "there was a joint commission evaluation that was conducted, and she told me that it was her understanding that there were problems with the physical plant.”
"I think what I take away from all this is that the task force was correct," Doherty said. "The task force did conduct a very deliberative evaluation and looked at the facilities and that’s why it recommended Hagedorn not be closed."

Independent evaluation

The Joint Commission on Accreditation of Healthcare Organizations is an independent, nonprofit group with offices in Illinois and Washington, D.C. It accredits and certifies more than 19,000 health care organizations and programs in the United States.

The commission visits health facilities every three years and performs a review spanning more than two dozen categories and hundreds of factors, according to Nicole Brossoie, spokeswoman for the Department of Human Services.

Trenton Psychiatric Hospital’s evaluation took place July 11-15, Brossoie said.

The next step for the commission will be to sit down with hospital officials and outline what the commission liked and disliked about the facility, according to commission spokeswoman Elizabeth Eaken Zhani.

The commission then re-evaluates its findings and issues a full evaluation within a few weeks.

The Department of Human Services declined to address the preliminary findings.

"Once the evaluation is received, Trenton will have an opportunity to clarify any potential findings or initiate corrective action within 30-60 days, depending on the citation," Brossoie wrote in an e-mail Wednesday.

If the improvements made don’t meet the commission’s approval, and after the hospital has an opportunity to appeal, there is a chance Trenton could lose its accreditation, Zhani said.

Savings already budgeted

The controversial decision to close Hagedorn over Trenton became final when Christie signed the $30 billion state budget. Hagedorn’s closing would save the state an estimated $9 million.

Trenton currently operates with an $11 million budget.

Christie’s office has deferred comment to Velez on the Hagedorn closure.
Velez, who supported Christie’s decision to close one of the state-run facilities, said in a statement that the closing is part "of the administration's ongoing commitment to transition patients to community-based care options."

"This is fundamentally a basic human rights issue when it comes to the quality of care our patients with psychiatric and developmental disabilities receive, and we are beginning to make it possible for them to have the opportunity to live and thrive in a community setting rather than a clinical one," Velez stated.

Doherty said he spoke with Christie last week about Hagedorn and asked him to reconsider the Hagedorn closure. The senator earlier this month abstained from a vote on a bill that aimed to restore funding for Hagedorn. He said the hospital would not have remained open because it was the governor's decision to close it.

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