

An Open Letter to Governor Pritzker from Friends of Choate

March 15, 2023

Dear Governor Pritzker:

The Illinois Department of Human Services is targeting 123 residents of Choate Developmental Center for removal from their homes. We, the family members and guardians of these residents, were blindsided. We were personally assured by members of your administration that Choate would not close and to disregard the rumors circulating in the wake of negative media attention about the facility. We were lulled by discussions about security upgrades, activities, and capital improvements. We learned one day prior to your administration's announcement that our wards and loved ones will be moved out of Choate and that, technically, what we were told about Choate not closing was true because some units will remain open, at least for now. We also learned that leaving part of Choate open allows evasion of the statutory requirements of the Commission on Government Forecasting and Accountability (COGFA) for a full closure.

Your administration's plan is to move people with significant developmental disabilities and severe behavior disorders to Community Integrated Living Arrangements (CILAs) or to other State Operated Developmental Centers (SODCs). The clear emphasis is on relocating these individuals to the community, where group homes are often staffed by low-wage, temporary workers. The history of previous SODC closures tells us that some of these 123 people will be confined to a home without the freedom offered by a larger campus like Choate's, some will not receive their scheduled medication, some will not be fed regularly, some will wander away from inattentive staff, and some will be arrested. Tragically, the history of SODC closures also tells us that some may die.

These are real people with names and people who love them. Many have lived in their homes for years or even decades. They have recreational activities and on-campus jobs. The residents know one another. Some have difficulty communicating with words or are completely nonverbal, but they know the staff and the staff know them. The staff includes behaviorists, doctors, and nurses who know residents' routines and likes and dislikes and the hundred little things that contribute to happiness, stability, and a fulfilling life.

These Choate homes targeted for closure are certified by Public Health and overseen by that organization to ensure compliance with federal regulations. They are also overseen by the DHS Office of Inspector General. Any abuse or neglect violations are reported through that office. The level of accountability at Choate is far higher than in community placements where self reporting of abuse is less likely.

The justifications provided for moving these residents are troubling. For instance, it was cited that Illinois has one of the higher numbers of SODCs in the country, which therefore should be reduced, as if the country's decades-long trend to close SODCs should be followed. The move to eliminate the SODC model, no matter how slow or stealthy, would violate the Supreme Court's guidelines in Olmstead and the Medicaid State Plan, and could be regarded as unlawfully discriminatory under both Medicaid and the ADA.

Governor, you should be proud – and Illinois should be proud – to have more SODCs than the many states that fail to treat high needs individuals. These other states often leave these vulnerable people to jails or the street. Illinois should not chase this trend. Illinois should continue to serve its most vulnerable with dignity and compassion.

Another justification for closure of units was the recent series of negative stories about Choate. All cases of abuse are terrible. It is Choate's system of accountability that ensured that these cases were reported and referred for prosecution. It is this system of accountability that is being twisted against Choate to justify its closure of units. Community placements have no such levels of accountability. Further, this extreme reaction to negative press victimizes the residents who must move from their homes - losers in a political game they do not understand. Removing residents does not make them safer. It upends their lives and, for many of those who go to community placements, it makes them less safe.

We ask that the vulnerable residents of Choate be allowed to keep their home.

Sincerely,
Rita Burke, President, Friends of Choate

Friends of Choate and the Illinois League of Advocates for the Developmentally Disabled, ILADD, fully endorse the positions presented in this letter.