



BILLINGS GAZETTE

Gazette opinion: Better care for Montana's disabled residents



2 HOURS AGO

The state of Montana has taken on an urgent mission to do better by our most severely disabled residents.

“Bullock signs bill to close Montana Developmental Center in Boulder,” a Gazette headline said last week. The bigger story is the state accepting responsibility to create better services for each of the 53 men and women – all seriously

developmentally disabled and some with mental illnesses as well — now housed at this institution in a small community in Western Montana.

Gov. Steve Bullock acknowledged that responsibility in a two-page signing statement, which said, in part:

“The state, community-based providers and stakeholders must work together to find pathways to community-based treatment for those who are ready. Roughly 24 of the 53 Montanans who are currently residing at MDC are ready for community placement. A lot has been said about who is responsible for those placements, but in the end it does not matter who is to blame. We have a legal and moral obligation to work together toward solutions.”

Parents who have or had adult children placed at Montana Developmental Center told legislators heart-wrenching stories, some in support of keeping the institution that they felt provided the best home for their high-needs son or daughter. Others gave horrifying accounts of abuse, neglect, injury and deterioration they blamed on MDC.

Abuse, neglect documented

Disability Rights Montana, a nonprofit organization that has advocated for decades for appropriate care, presented a lengthy report detailing abuse and neglect of clients by staff and abuse by other clients. Some of these incidents were investigated and documented by federal regulators or by the Montana Department of Justice.

Although eight of the 59 individuals housed at MDC in January were placed because of crimes, most of the center's clients have committed no crime and have not been locked up at the Boulder institution.

The signing statement makes clear that Bullock struggled with his decision on Senate Bill 411, and he went against the wishes of one of the state's largest unions.

Sponsored by Sen. Mary Caferro, D-Helena, a longtime advocate for disabled Montanans, the bill received overwhelming support in both the House and Senate. But it was staunchly opposed by the community of Boulder, where it is a major employer, and by the union that represents many of MDC's 200-plus employees.

At Bullock's insistence, Boulder and employee representation was added to the committee charged with planning the transition from an inefficient, ineffective institution to new, intensive community services that will meet the needs of all, or at least most, of the folks now at MDC. Other members of the 15-person committee must include: four legislators, representatives of state agencies, representatives of various community service providers, and family members of individuals at MDC or previously there.

As seriously disabled adults are transitioned to new community services, new jobs will be created. They should be created closer to clients' families. New services should take advantage of other community strengths, such as a sufficient labor pool, availability of physical, speech, psychiatric and occupational therapists, nurses and physicians, as well as opportunities to interact positively with family, friends and neighbors.

SB411 isn't Montana's first attempt to get more appropriate care for MDC residents. It must become the effort that succeeds.

Care for more Montanans

Last year, more than \$15 million was spent on MDC — about \$270,000 per resident. Meanwhile, more than 800 other developmentally disabled Montanans got no help from the state. They are on waiting lists for group homes, vocational training and other services they need to reach their full potential.

Any money saved by transitioning folks out of MDC will be used for other services to developmentally disabled Montanans, according to the new law.

In that way, the transition mandate may improve the lives of many more Montanans.

We agree with Caferro, who said Bullock put "people ahead of politics."