



Shut Them Down

Issue: 06

WASH STATE NEEDS A HERO

Penn Governor vetoes bill to keep 2 institutions for disabled

Wolf said that the bill would have continued a reliance on institutionalization versus better and more integrated lives for people living with disabilities.

HARRISBURG, Pa. — Gov. Tom Wolf is following through on his threat to veto legislation designed to prevent his administration from closing two state centers for the intellectually disabled.

Wolf said Wednesday that the bill would have continued a reliance on institutionalization, versus better and more integrated lives for the disabled through community services.

The bill emerged after Wolf's announcement in August that he would close White Haven in northeastern Pennsylvania and Polk in northwestern Pennsylvania.

The closings were fought by employees and family members of the centers' residents, who also filed a lawsuit in federal court in an effort to block the shutdowns.

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(Photo: TBISN)

Governor Tom Wolf's comments:

Gov. Wolf's SB 906 veto message:

"All people deserve the opportunity to live among their family and peers in integrated, supportive homes. Quality home and community-based care should be the priority for the individuals we serve.

"Community care results in better outcomes for individuals with disabilities. Individuals with disabilities should be offered an everyday life as fully integrated members of our communities. My goal is to serve more individuals in the community, reduce reliance on institutional care, and improve access to home and community-based services.

"This legislation does not promote this investment and transition to community-based care for individuals with a disability. Instead, this legislation continues the reliance on institutionalization and is a barrier to community living. "Specifically, this legislation is in response to the recent announcement

of the closures of two state-operated centers: Polk State Center and White Haven State Center. These centers are large institutions that are costly to maintain and do not promote

community living. As individuals have transitioned to the community, the need for state-operated centers has declined. It should be acknowledged that closures of state centers have always been controversial.

Process that the Department of Human Services has followed for state center closure announcements was established to provide for the planful transition of residents and staff honor agreements with employee unions.

The department has followed this announcement procedure for the last two decades. The Department fully understands the gravity of the decision to close a center and has extensive procedures in place for such closures

The secret war on the left between unions and people with disabilities

Labor is opposed to closing institutions as people with disabilities are increasingly moving toward community settings.

Early 2019, Pennsylvania's Department of Human Services [announced it would](#) close the Polk State Center, one of its largest institutions for people with developmental disabilities, within three years. People with Down syndrome, autism, cerebral palsy and other conditions are often housed at places like the Polk Center, and often involuntarily. The Arc of Greater Pittsburgh, which advocates for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities, hailed the news, because research shows that people with disabilities are better served living in communities, with [support services delivered at home](#).

But after news of the announced closure of the Polk Center, [which employs 700 people](#) who receive state employee wages and benefits, AFSCME Council 13 posted a [picture](#) on Twitter of employees holding signs reading "Disabled Lives Matter" and

"They don't want to leave. Ask them!" Another union chapter, UFCW Local 1776 KS, posted an image of its members outside the State Capitol with their fists raised. It was a demonstration of solidarity with their fellow workers — but not with people with disabilities.

[Scary asylums are a Halloween classic, but it's time to retire the trope](#) This was hardly the first time unions have aggressively opposed steps that would allow people with disabilities to live with their loved ones. [They rallied](#) in Washington state when disability rights activists pushed to close the Fircrest School in 2017 and are still [fighting to keep institutions](#) open in New York state.

Labor and disability rights activists, two core blocs in the progressive coalition, often find themselves at odds, because it turns out that unions' interest in keeping their members' good-paying jobs conflicts with the interests of one of society's most

vulnerable populations — people with developmental disabilities and significant mental-health conditions.

Since the 1970s, AFSCME and other unions have repeatedly fought the closure of state hospitals, asylums and other large congregate settings that in many instances have harmed people with disabilities. These institutions, though well-meaning, are tied to an outdated paradigm about disability. In 1897, the Polk Center became the first state-run institution for disabled people in Pennsylvania. But the rise of the eugenics movement in the early 20th century turned places like the center into instruments to weed out the "feebleminded" and others deemed ["unfit."](#)

In the 1970s, children were kept in cages and tied to benches. In 1999, [six doctors were arrested](#) and charged in the deaths of three patients and the mistreatment of dozens of others, which included stitching up lacerations



Protestors at Eastern WA Gov office concerned about 40,000 Lakeland Village violations

In the past two years, officials launched investigations into claims of [sexual assault](#) and [abuse](#). [Canada is a progressive immigration policy dream — unless you have a disability](#) This problem is not unique to the Polk Center. Any setting with people who have limited abilities to communicate and staff who have complete control over their daily lives is dangerous. For example, [a 1994 study](#) of people with developmental disabilities in Connecticut showed that 87 percent of the abuse and neglect cases over a five-year period happened in institutions and group homes, as opposed to in a person's own home. California announced [plans](#) to shutter its last institutions in 2018 after [years of preventable deaths](#), covered up under claims of medical

privacy. In March, the federal government ordered portions of the [Rainier School](#), one of the last institutions in Washington state, to partially [shut down](#) after a government report concluded the school was failing to engage in "active treatment" with residents.

The unions frequently assert that some people are too disabled to live in the community and require institutionalization. On AFSCME Council 13's website, local president and Polk Center employee Tammy Luce says: "I don't believe a lot of the residents would survive the change into a so-called 'community-based setting.' A lot of them are very fragile."

Meanwhile, [unions often couple](#) with pro-institutionalization groups such

as [VOR](#) to claim they have the support of parents. But groups like VOR are in the minority, with almost every mainstream disability rights organization [supporting deinstitutionalization](#).

Those labor unions are not paying attention to the national trend. Only four of Pennsylvania's 25 state hospitals remain. Nationwide, the number of people with intellectual and developmental disabilities in institutions has shrunk from about 180,000 in the late 1960s to a little less than half that number. That figure will shrink as states continue to move toward home- and community-based care.

Unions say home- and community-based services are [a form of privatization](#) that undermines labor and delivers fewer services to the detriment of patients. [AFSCME describes](#) deinstitutionalization as "yet another way to push the responsibility for service and funding into the private sector." But the Association of University Centers on Disabilities, where I used to work, [examined 36 studies](#) of outcomes for almost 5,000 people with intellectual disabilities and found that an overwhelming majority of the studies showed positive outcomes for those who moved from institutions to community living settings.

Original story by: By Sara Luterman
The Pennsylvania State Capitol in Harrisburg, Pa. (Salwan Georges/The Washington Post) November 14, 2019