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Ad Lib

Pennhurst problems

By BILL MOONEY

A rape, a fire and an assault: Pennhurst's track record the last month.

Something has to be done: Close the institution or improve it so it resembles something suitable for human habitation.

If the state lets the home for 975 mentally retarded people keep going like this, even the most hard-line deinstitutionalization opponents will be clamoring to close the place.

What's going on there has been going on for years, some will argue. That's a valid point that doesn't excuse conditions today.

There are court orders that say Pennhurst has to be better, there's an administration that wants to make it better, there's even a state government that professes a desire to make it better.

Still, this stuff continues.

It's not the staff's fault per se. There's not enough staff there to handle the everyday problems, let alone prevent the almost inexcusable situations that have been happening.

Harrisburg controls the hiring, and Harrisburg has been cutting back on Welfare personnel wherever it can.

The standard line from the Welfare Department PR office is that Thornburgh has a commitment to phasing out Pennhurst at its own pace.

At the rate the state's going, those severely and profoundly retarded people may be beat up, assaulted or injured in some probably preventable accident before they move out.

And some may move out in a coffin.

That's another story though. Before U.S. District Judge Raymond Broderick next Tuesday,

there'll be a hearing on a retardation expert's findings that the deaths of many Pennhurst residents could be prevented with a more efficient medical system and more and better trained personnel.

The courts are settling whether the mentally retarded belong in communities or institutions, but no one, not even those who prefer Pennhurst over unproven community settings, can justify the sword of Damocles lifestyle that Pennhurst clients live under.

Pennhurst may or may not be any different from any other institution in this state. It gets more publicity than any other facility because of the court case and its constitutional importance.

It would make sense then that if the state wants to further institutionalization it would make sure that the standard of living at its most publicized institution would be better than the life of a wooden duck in a shooting gallery.

If it wanted to close Pennhurst in its own way and at its own pace, it had the chance to stop waffling and step up the pace. Now, the state's hands might be tied by the Supreme Court's ruling that no one can be forced from Pennhurst until the case is settled.

People who oppose Pennhurst's closing often claim community living is insecure and dangerous to the residents.

Pennhurst in its current state isn't much better, and each day that it continues in this condition is just one more argument for closing it down.

If Pennsylvania wants to convince the Supreme Court this fall to let Pennhurst stay open, they better make Pennhurst more of a home and less of a danger zone.