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Grosse Pointe Woods

Changing times close children's home

State treatment policy shifts, tough economy too much for facility that dates to 1836.

Karen Bouffard / The Detroit News

GROSSE POINTE WOODS -- A Grosse Pointe Woods children's home that has provided treatment for troubled children for 172 years will be shuttered at the end of November, a result of the state's shifting priorities for residential treatment of children and the economy.

The board of trustees of the Children's Home of Detroit voted Thursday to shutter the facility, which houses 5-to-17-year-olds in cottages on a 13-acre country-like campus. The home can house about 90 children; it has 28 children in residence, said Executive Director William Steele.

The state is placing fewer children in residential treatment settings partly because of the settlement of a lawsuit brought by the New York City-based child advocacy group Children's Rights. The group sued Michigan over poor treatment of children in foster care that resulted in several deaths.

"It's no different than the stories you're hearing about businesses that have to downsize or go out of business," Steele said. "The economy has certainly drained some of those resources we had available for operations.

"That, coupled with the low occupancy and the uncertainty about the direction of care for children, has combined to make it necessary for us to close."

Under terms of the lawsuit settlement, which took effect Oct. 24, the state Department of Human Services agreed to place children in the least restrictive setting possible, said Jack Kresnak, president of the nonprofit advocacy group Michigan's Children.

"The gist of the settlement was there would be a movement to get kids out of institutions and into family homes as soon as possible," Kresnak said. "It's been very abrupt for institutions that deal with very troubled children."

The home was founded in Detroit in 1836 as a place for children orphaned in widespread cholera epidemics. The institution moved to then-rural Grosse Pointe in the 1950s, because it was believed children would benefit from being out in the country.

Funding for the home comes from a combination of state funds, private grants and individual donations, Steele said. But donations have fallen, he said.

The home's focus right now is on finding appropriate placements, Steele added. Depending on their circumstances, children will be returned home, to foster care or, if necessary, to other treatment programs or hospitals.

"They're going to be in an environment where they have 24-hour care, and their basic needs will all be met," Steele said. "They will not go to an environment where they will be given less."

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