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Home for troubled teens slated to close

By PATRICK McARDLE STAFF WRITER

BENNINGTON – A local long-term residential educational facility for at-risk youth, 204 Depot Street, will be closing this week and leaving 10 people without jobs, according to William Bryan, president of the Board of Directors of SEALL Inc.

"The decision was made to cease making referrals. Statewide (the Department of Children and Families,) told us, they have to cut between 12 and 18 beds. We were only filling roughly 10 of those beds so that their other programs will have to feel our pain as well," Bryan said.

204 Depot Street, which will close on Feb. 6, serves older adolescent boys, between the ages of 15 and 17, through a residential educational program that lasts at least a year. It is run by SEALL Inc., a local nonprofit organization with a board of eight people.

Last week, state Sen. Richard Sears, one of the founders of 204 Depot Street in 1971 and a member of the Board of Directors until 2006, said he was sorry to hear about the closure.

"Obviously, I've been involved with it for much of my life so this was a great part of my life. It's a sad day for me," Sears said on Wednesday.

The closure will leave nine full-time employees and one part-time employee without jobs. According to Bryan, some of those staff members had been with the organization for 25 years.

Bryan said that SEALL hoped to continue to operate 204 Depot Street until the spring, but the 10-bed facility was down to four residents. With Vermont's budget crisis, there was no money to support an organization that was operating at only 40 percent capacity and with no referrals, there was no possibility of bringing in new residents, Bryan said.

"We're not closing because we can't do the job. We know we can do the job. We're closing because the state is saying the population we work best with just isn't there anymore. They're either more damaged than what we've been dealing with or they're not damaged enough that they need our program," he said.

As an example of the program's success, Bryan described a young man who "other programs wouldn't touch ... because he was so damaged," but who would be leaving 204 Depot Street on the path to a high school diploma and with job skills and a "pro-social" attitude.

Sears said he is concerned that some of the teenagers who had been served by 204 Depot Street would now end up in jail.

Bryan, who said he had been involved with 204 Depot Street from its early days, said he believed people in the Bennington area had come to appreciate what the organization

offered and accomplished.

"The community did an awful lot for us and we did an awful lot for the community. We wouldn't have been in existence without community support," he said.

Bryan said operations at 204 Depot Street's companion program, 206 Depot Street, a short-term "stabilization" program for troubled boys, will continue and may even expand.

The Board of Directors at SEALL plans to meet with representatives of the Department of Children and Families and the Department of Corrections to see if there are other services, which Bryan said could "reduce the pressure" on the Woodside Juvenile Facility in East Essex.

The Board of Directors has no plans to sell the building at 204 Depot Street, but Bryan said future plans for the building were still developing.

"I don't have a better term than (to) call it a 'menu of options.' We are committed as a board to continuing to serve the youth of Bennington and Vermont. Whether that's through the Department of Children and Families or the Department of Corrections doesn't matter to us, it's the population that we want to serve," he said.

While Sears said he was disappointed in what was happening at 204 Depot Street, he also said it was "nothing new."

During the state's last major financial crisis in the mid-1990s, the parent organization shut down 206 Depot Street and was unable to reopen it for a little more than a year.

Bryan and Sears said at least 400 teenagers had gone through the program at 204 Depot Street.

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