

## Can 250 Go To 'Small Groups'?

## Kids In Center Of Child Home Debate

By KATHY MORAN

The 250 children at Wayne County Child Development Center in Northville Township may become unlucky victims in a continuing debate between county and state agencies.

That's the fear of many teachers and staff members there in light of a recent report which recommends closing the 750-acre campus.

And it's a feeling shared by other professionals who contend there aren't enough places to house the children in Detroit. Wayne County commissioners will determine the center's fate.

The first step to displacing the seven to 10-year-olds came in the issuance of a state task force report which recommended that the 750-acre campus be closed and the children shifted into small group residences.

Because the residents are either mentally retarded or disturbed with 10 less than 90, many have already been shifted from agency to agency in an effort to find

programs compatible to their needs.

The child development center is currently the only place prepared to handle the "troubled" children.

Although the task force report admits this fact, it still recommends that the children be phased out into appropriate facilities or foster homes, emptying the center by July of 1974.

But would the children be able to function in foster or small group homes?

"Some would and some wouldn't," said Dr. Ralph Rabinovitch, former director of Hawthorn Center.

Many of the children who are at the center are there because they need concentrated attention, he said.

"It's going to be very difficult to find appropriate small group homes for them," he said. "I'm not saying that some of the children can't be placed in the community."

But to plan to place all of them, I would say, is wishful thinking.

Th Wayne County Juvenile Court is responsible for more

"These are real rock-bottom type kids. Foster homes are not the answer for the severely emotionally disturbed child."

--A Psychologist

than 50 per cent of the referrals to the center and the Detroit public schools refer about 20 per cent.

The task force report indicated 57 per cent of the referrals were for social immaturity, 46 per cent for lack of academic achievement in special education classes, 33 per cent for truancy from home and school, 41 per cent for incorrigibility at home, 33 per cent for physical aggression against peers and 11 per cent against adults, 20 per cent for lack of achievement in regular classes and less than 10 per cent for criminal or sexually deviant acts or drug abuse.

Ninety-seven per cent of the children had multiple reasons for referral. "Some need time away from their environment to find themselves," Dr. Rabinovitch said. "After they have had help they should be prepared to return to the community."

"The notion of taking 250 children from any facility and finding places for them is, I think, impossible," said Samuel Davis, executive director of the Michigan Assn. for Emotionally Disturbed Children. "There are no places that can accommodate that many kids."

When voicing his protest to the human resources committee composed of county commissioners, Davis said that small group homes aren't practical for the center's type of population.

"Small group homes care for mildly disturbed children is fine, but most of Wayne County's mildly disturbed children are being served."

"The children who are being referred to the child development center and to other hospital programs are severely disturbed. They need something more than small group homes or special education in our public schools."

Pat Tombeau, a unit psychologist at the center, echoed a similar concern.

"These are real rock bottom type kids," he said. "Foster homes are not the answer for the severely emotionally disturbed child."

The report itself has been attacked by center employees who question conclusions made by a committee which hardly saw the campus.

The committee held its first meeting in August on the center's campus -- and even then it didn't observe the programs and living conditions, according to Michael J. O'Hair, director of inservice training.

"Our buildings are also adaptable to small group living facilities," O'Hair said. "The center's environment is clean; the air is fresh; the buildings are widely spaced, well ventilated, structurally sound and flexible for remodeling, if desired."

"The environment is generally less stressful than that in the home of many of these youngsters," he said during a public meeting.

Although the committee used six previous studies as references for its investigation, it apparently ignored the findings in the earlier studies, O'Hair said. Earlier reports suggested ways of strengthening the programs and none recommending closing it.

The 1968 Citizens' Review Committee report states: "Our recommendation is to appoint a new superintendent and make the advice and services of the present superintendent available to him if he wishes."

"Regardless of the merit or lack of merit of his (Superintendent) activity, there are to me negative factors operating for the current superintendent to develop an effective program."

Although the weak administration was blamed for weaknesses in the center's program in previous reports, county commissioners failed to follow any recommendations as far as changing the administration, O'Hair noted.

"They've decided it's easier to close the center than to overhaul it," he said. "It's just because they are gutless."

"We just don't understand where they got their statistics at all," he continued, noting that the report states it would take a minimum of \$2 to \$5 million to renovate the buildings.

Most of the 51 buildings were constructed in 1928 when the center first opened and are structurally sound, says Stanley Belanger, general trades foreman at the center.

Belanger directs the 16 member maintenance and building crew which consists of carpenters, painters, a bricklayer, electricians, plumbers etc.

"I'm on record as saying that nobody from that task force ever approached me or talked to me about it," Belanger said.

He said the buildings passed their accreditation "with flying colors" and comply completely with the Detroit fire code, one of the toughest in Michigan. He admits repairs are needed, but says his staff can handle them.

A recent fire, which had been set by one of the residents, reached a high intensity and "tons of water" were poured on it, he said. But the fire didn't damage other rooms, and the water didn't even leak to the room below.

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"I want you to show me any modern-type structure that would withstand these pressures," he said.

The report recommends closing the campus but doesn't mention what would become of the buildings and land.

"At the same time as they are talking of closing this facility, the community mental health board in Detroit has recognized the need for more beds," Dr. Rabinovitch said. "On one hand, they are recommending closing of this facility, and on the other hand they are asking for more beds."

Belanger said that he prepared plans a year ago for dividing the dormitories into small group rooms to comply with modern concepts in mental health. For an unknown reason, the plans never got past the drawing boards, he said.

They call for dividers in each dormitory room which house 10 to 15 children each. Lockers would be at each end of the rooms, and indoor-outdoor carpeting would be installed to make the rooms more homey.

During the public hearing, O'Hair pointed out another concern related to care of the children.

"In 1928, when the center was constructed, Detroit was the center of society and affluence in the state. As was the fashion of the time, the 'misfits' from this society were placed as far away as possible from the city in institutions. Several of those are located in the Northville area."

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