

RESIDENTIAL SCHOOL FOR DISABLED CLOSING

Maryhaven Center's 2020 plan 'a big shock' to parents

BY DAVID OLSON
david.olson@newsday.com

A Port Jefferson residential school for children and young adults with severe developmental disabilities is set to close by mid-2020, leaving parents worried about where their children will receive assistance.

Maryhaven Center of Hope will not close the school until all 71 students ages 5 to 21 are placed elsewhere, said Chris Hendriks, spokeswoman for Catholic Health Services, of which Maryhaven is a part.

The school has had years of financial losses, which reached \$1.7 million last year, and Maryhaven had tried to find a way to keep the school open, she said.

"We've been talking about this for a very long time," Hendriks said. "It's not something we would like to do. It's not something that anyone decided lightly."

Forty-eight of the students are from Long Island and 23 are from New York City. The school began informing parents of the closure plans over the past few days, Hendriks said.

Monica Grossman of Plainview had a hard time caring for her autistic child after he got home from his day school for special-needs kids. "He was getting older, bigger and more difficult to handle at home," she said of her 16-year-old son.

"Maryhaven has been great," she said. "We've been very happy with it. He's been doing well there. I'm sad he's not going to be there."

A Mount Sinai parent who asked, for privacy reasons, that his name not be used enrolled his 16-year-old daughter with autism in the school in February 2018 after years first in a public school and then in a day school for kids with special needs.

She had refused to eat all but a few foods, urinated in bed and in class, and had other behavioral problems, he said. Since she has been in Maryhaven, she has improved dramatically. She's hap-



The Maryhaven Center of Hope in Port Jefferson, which serves 71 students, is seeking other placements for them before the closing.

pier, eats a variety of foods during three meals a day and is more energetic, he said.

"This is a really amazing school . . .," he said. "It is a big shock the facility is closing."

Grossman said she wished government funding closed the gap to keep the school open.

Hendriks said that as costs to care for the children and other expenses rose, state reimbursements did not keep up.

Declining enrollment and the estimated \$10 million-plus needed to renovate and modernize the 85-year-old school and residence were among the other factors, she said.

Lewis Grossman, president and CEO of Maryhaven, said officials were concerned that losses at the school would impact other programs at Maryhaven, which serves more than 1,500 children and adults with special needs and mental-health and substance-abuse issues at 78 day-program and residential facilities across Long Island.

There are about 200 full-time employees at the school — including teachers, aides, housekeepers and maintenance workers — and Catholic Health Services hopes to gradually place all of them at other Health Services locations, most with Maryhaven, Hendriks said.

The school is geared toward

people ages 5 to 21, but Maryhaven sometimes continues to house ex-students older than 21 for as many as several years, until a suitable placement in an adult home is found, Grossman said.

After June, there will be 32 people older than 21 in the dormitory, Hendriks said. Maryhaven will work with the state to find new homes for them, she said.

Maryhaven also will work with local school districts to place school-age residents elsewhere, Grossman said. There are five similar residential schools on Long Island, Hendriks said.

State education department officials said in an email that each school district "is responsible for determining an appropriate placement for each student."

Grossman said many or most of the 71 students are on the autism spectrum, and they typically have major behavioral and communication challenges. They came to Maryhaven after school districts were not able to meet their "very severe and chronic needs," he said.

Fallon Franzel, a teacher at the school for nearly 14 years, said she and other instructors develop deep bonds with the students. "We really see how the students progress," she said. "The students have become family."



NEWSDAY / J. CONRAD WILLIAMS JR.



NEWSDAY / J. CONRAD WILLIAMS JR.

JEFF BACHNER