

# Privatization at state hospital a bitter pill, patients testify

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By G. Wayne Miller

Journal Staff Writer



Frank Beazley, a longtime resident of Eleanor Slater Hospital, talks yesterday with Ellen Nelson, director of the Department of Mental Health, Retardation and Hospitals.

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PROVIDENCE — The state's leading advocate for the disabled traveled from Burrillville to the State House yesterday to deliver a message to lawmakers and bureaucrats who'd gathered for a House Finance Committee hearing.

Frank Beazley was not pleased.

Among other cuts and changes, Governor Carcieri's proposed 2008 budget for the state Department of Mental Health, Retardation and Hospitals would privatize housekeeping and food service at the state-run Eleanor Slater Hospital, including its Zambarano unit, where Beazley has lived for 40 years this month. Strangers, Beazley said, could never provide the care that established workers on the staff do.

"A lot of the patients are very concerned out there — just as much as I am," said Beazley, 78, who was left a quadriplegic in a fall in early 1967.

Beazley was not alone in his sentiments.

"Privatization is not going to be able to meet our needs," said Bill Feole, who has been at Zambarano for almost two decades. "To put a dollar factor on quality of life is really a shame."

Legislators questioned the plan to save what the MHRH claims will be an estimated \$5.4 million a year by eliminating 180 housekeeping and dietary jobs at Zambarano and the

other Slater campus in Cranston. Food and cleaning services at the two facilities would be provided by outside firms, according to the plan.

“It would be an awful blow to see all these people go,” said Beazley.

Lawmakers were skeptical of the savings that the MHRH purports to see in privatization. Of the 180 potentially affected employees, 61 workers have 20 or more years of state service and by law would have to be offered other jobs with the state, MHRH Director Ellen Nelson conceded in an answer to Rep. Edwin R. Pacheco, D-Burrillville. That, Pacheco said, would reduce the savings to some \$2.5 million.

Pacheco’s exchange was tactful, if pointed — but House Finance Chairman Steven M. Costantino, D-Providence, put Nelson firmly on the hot seat. Whose idea was privatization, anyway, he asked — the department’s or the governor’s?

Nelson did not directly answer.

“This was not on our original list,” she said. “‘Fiscal fitness’ came into the picture.”

The implication — correct, lawmakers suggested — was that the idea originated in Carcieri’s Department of Administration.

Did Nelson involve the unions representing the 180 workers in discussions of ways to achieve savings? Costantino wanted to know. The affected workers at Slater are represented by R.I. Council 94, AFSCME, and the Laborers’ International Union of North America, according to a union official.

“The department did not direct the process,” Nelson said.

But wasn’t it a director’s responsibility to involve the unions? Costantino asked.

“I think that’s a very reasonable thing to do,” said Nelson.

“It seems in this case that option wasn’t there.”

“It wasn’t built-in,” said Nelson, a Carcieri appointee who has had her job about a year.

Rep. Raymond Church, a North Smithfield Democrat whose district includes part of Burrillville, asked if privatization would improve, maintain or diminish service.

“I think it’s too early to tell,” said Nelson. But, she added, “I would not be in favor of anything that would diminish the quality of their dietary or housekeeping services.”

Lawmakers also questioned the validity of the cost-comparison study that supposedly would bring savings.

Beazley and Feole said that no outside firm could replace the quality of care — and the personal touch — that food and housekeeping workers now provide. Feole noted that many employees come in on days off to volunteer. And with most of the Zambarano workers living in Burrillville or nearby communities, Beazley said the impact on local employment would be significant.

“It would have an awful impact on the economy and everything else,” said Beazley. “I’d really like you to reconsider.”

The governor has proposed spending \$492.8 million in the next fiscal year on the MHRH, about the same as this year. Other proposed cuts in MHRH services also came under the gun at yesterday’s hearing, for which more than 60 people signed up to testify.

[gwmiller@projo.com](mailto:gwmiller@projo.com)