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The Future of Camarillo State Hospital & Developmental Center

Why can't the facility stay the way it is now?

Camarillo now operates in two capacities -- as a state hospital for the mentally ill and a state developmental center (DC) for individuals with serious developmental disabilities. The two separate parts of the facility are affected by different factors, but their operations depend a lot on each other.

What about the developmental center half?

The state is in a five-year program to shift many developmentally disabled clients from DCs to community-based care. As the number of institutionalized clients drops, the state closes facilities and consolidates clients into the remaining facilities. This downsizing caused the Department of Developmental Services to shut Stockton DC this year. The downsizing is continuing to the point DDS says it won't need Camarillo as a developmental center after 1997.

Can't Camarillo stay open for the mentally ill who are there now?

The problem is, if the 490 developmentally disabled clients are moved out, the facility will be left with only 390 mentally ill patients. It's simply not cost-efficient to run such a large hospital for so few patients. In fact, that's just about the population level where the state decided it was no longer economical to keep Stockton DC open.

What would happen to Camarillo's economy if the facility closes?

The institution now has 1,500 employees with a payroll of about \$80 million a year. The rule of thumb for economists is that every dollar of payroll generates about three dollars in local economy improvement. This "multiplier effect" is because employees spend money at local business, then those businesses in turn buy their products and spend their money locally, and so on. In addition to staff salaries, Camarillo spends another \$15 million a year in food, supplies and other operating costs.

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So what's the solution for keeping the hospital open?

The main alternative being advanced at this point is to keep Camarillo as a state hospital for the mentally ill. However, its mission would be expanded to include a lot more patients committed through the judicial system -- the so-called "forensic" patients. For many years now, there have been forensics at Camarillo, and there have been no major problems. So the concept is to expand on this population in order to keep the hospital in operation. This means adding 800 or more forensic patients.

Wouldn't those new patients include Sexually Violent Predators?

Yes, but that is no cause for alarm. A new law that took effect January 1st deals with prison inmates who were convicted of violent, sex-related offenses against two or more victims. When they've served their prison time, the new law says they can't simply be paroled into the community. Instead, they must be evaluated for whether they should spend at least another two years in secure custody. And this two-year commitment can be renewed if it's found that they still pose a threat to the public. At this point, the state has no place to keep these offenders. They see the Camarillo facility as a very real possibility.

Won't this be a greater danger to the public?

Actually, the answer is no, according to officials from the state Departments of Corrections and Mental Health. All of those who are in prison and awaiting to be re-committed as SVP's have been convicted of two felonies. So they already have "two strikes" against them. If they commit another violent crime, the "three-strikes" law puts them in prison for life. That's a very big incentive for them not to commit any other crimes, whether inside the hospital or outside.

Is Camarillo secure enough for this type of offender?

The SVP law requires these offenders to be confined in a facility that has perimeter security provided by the state Department of Corrections. So Camarillo would be modified to include high-security razor-wire fences, electronic surveillance and guard posts. Inside that perimeter, the treatment programs would be run by the state Department of Mental Health. In essence, that would make Camarillo very much like to another state hospital that's been operating for years, Patton State Hospital in San Bernardino.

Then what's the community's experience with Patton State Hospital?

San Bernardino city and county officials say they are very happy having Patton in their community. The hospital has been very good for their local economy, and there has been no real danger to the public. In the past 10 years, there have been only three escapes from Patton. They say all were found quickly and none caused any harm to local residents.

Could developmentally disabled clients with local families stay here?

Probably yes. The plan under consideration now is to keep the 125 developmentally disabled clients whose families are local. These clients would be moved to an area of the facility isolated from the mentally ill offenders. In effect, it would be a small developmental center of its own.

What about the concept of converting the facility to a state university?

The California State University system is studying the concept of converting it to a CSU campus for Ventura County. But the feeling in Sacramento at this point is such a plan really wouldn't be cost-effective. It's better to start from scratch by building a new campus on the 260 acres of undeveloped land that CSU has already bought for \$7 million. And one major drawback to a university conversion is the cost of upgrading the local road system to the Camarillo hospital in order to adequately carry the additional traffic generated by a four-year university.

Couldn't the university conversion be done like happened at Fort Ord?

It's true, a large part of the abandoned Fort Ord Army base was converted to Monterey Bay State University which opened a few months ago. But that conversion had a major advantage that wouldn't be available at Camarillo. That's the \$130 million dollars the federal government gave the university to help pay for the remodeling.