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Youth treatment center to close

By Carrie Ann Knauer, Times Staff Writer

A 43-bed youth treatment center in Marriottsville will be closing next month as the Maryland Department of Juvenile Services transitions more youths away from residential facilities to community-based treatment programs.

The Thomas O'Farrell Youth Center is scheduled to close Nov. 30, said Tammy Brown, a spokeswoman for the Department of Juvenile Services. Of the close to 30 nonviolent youth offenders now at the center, 10 will be transferred to other residential facilities and the rest will be sent home to continue treatment in their communities, she said.

"There's a big push for kids to be treated in the community and in their homes with their families," Brown said.

Brown said department staff had been discussing the transition with North American Family Institute, the organization that runs the O'Farrell center, since May. NAFI, which runs several treatment programs throughout the Northeast, will also be transitioning to offer community-based treatment in Baltimore and Baltimore County.

NAFI will be offering a new MultiSystemic Therapies Program starting in January, according to a press release by the Department of Juvenile Services. This approach works with youths in their homes and family environments to look at all factors that influence the youth's behavior, and addresses some of the systemic problems, Brown said.

For example, if a youth referred to the department is living with parents with a drug abuse problem, that is something the therapy program would address to help both the youth and the entire family, she said.

The closing of the O'Farrell center comes a year and a half after Bowling Brook Preparatory School in Middleburg closed in March of 2007, following the death of a student at the school.

Nevada-based company Rite of Passage has submitted a proposal to the Governor's Office of Children to restart a youth treatment program at the school, Brown said, but so far the application has not been forwarded to the Department of Juvenile Services.

The closing of the O'Farrell center has nothing to do with recent developments on the future of Bowling Brook, Brown said.

"We certainly can't predict what's going to happen there," Brown said.

The main reason for transitioning away from residential treatment facilities, when appropriate, is that community-based programs cost less and have better success rates, Brown said. The state had been paying \$3.7 million to serve 80 youth a year at the O'Farrell center, she said, but will be contracting with NAFI for 100 slots that will serve 300 families over the course of the year through community-based programming for \$600,000.

In addition, MultiSystemic Therapies has shown reductions of 25 percent to 70 percent in long-term rates of re-arrest for serious juvenile offenders, as well as 47 to 64 percent reductions in out-of-home placements, according to a press release from department.

Bob Geddes, program director at the O'Farrell center, said NAFI has a MultiSystemic Therapies Program that is being practiced in other branches of the organization, and the counselors at O'Farrell will be used in the new program for Baltimore.

Employees in other types of positions, however, are being laid off, Geddes said.

At the height of the program the facility had a total of 69 employees, he said, but that number has been decreasing since the number of youths at the facility has been dropping. Geddes said the organization is trying to direct those that are going to be laid off to positions at similar facilities in the region.

“We’re just going through it and making sure everyone is safe and taken care, and that includes the staff,” Geddes said.

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