



N.J. to close 2 residential treatment facilities, displacing 39 children

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By **Susan K. Livio/Statehouse Bureau**



Amanda Brown/The Star-Ledger

Allison Blake is sworn in by N.J. Gov. Chris Christie to the office of the Commissioner of the Department of Children and Families in this July 2010 file photo.

TRENTON — The state will close two publicly-run residential treatment facilities that are home to 39 children with mental illness or who come from abusive families, state Children and Families Commissioner Allison Blake announced today.

The residential centers, in Ewing and Vineland, will close July 1. They cost about \$15.2 million in state and federal money to operate, according to the state budget, but Blake said finances did not drive her decision and doubts the closures will net much savings. Blake said the decision was based on the ample evidence these children fare better at home or in home-like environments than in a large group. That is where the remaining children will

go.

"We are really seeing a reduction in institutional residential treatment across the board, and a much greater emphasis on community-based services," Blake said. "We want to keep youth connected to communities, schools, and neighborhoods to the greatest extent we can."

The population at both centers has steady declined as the court-ordered child welfare reform effort required the department to keep kids at home whenever possible or when they were not safe or could not be handled at home, transferred to smaller home-like settings, Blake said. There are just 17 children at the 30-bed Ewing facility, and 22 at Vineland that could hold 36, she said.

The department closed a similar facility in Woodbridge on Jan. 1, Blake said.

Blake also declined to estimate how much money the state would save, partly because not all 180 people employed by the two centers will be laid off. Some may get hired within the department or at other departments before July.

Woodbridge employed 90 people, but when the facility shut down several days ago, only nine people were laid off, Blake said. "It's a testament to the efforts we are making on behalf of our employees. We are going to do our best."

A spokesperson for the Communications Workers of America could not be reached for comment.

Blake also said the savings would not amount to very much because "we're still responsible for providing services" for these children.

Carolyn Beauchamp, president and CEO the advocacy group, the Mental Health Association in New Jersey, said she agreed with Blake's decision.

These facilities "are very expensive," she said, and have traditionally been used by the child welfare system when a child had no other placement alternatives.

"Are these places supposed to function as shelters in an emergency, or meet mental health needs? If it's for mental health care, those needs are being met elsewhere," Beauchamp said.

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