

Failing Those With Developmental Disabilities

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In the 1970s and '80s, activists pushed for the closure of the Mansfield Training School in the belief that the developmentally disabled residents warehoused there for decades would be healthier, happier and more productive in small group homes in community settings.

In the two decades since Mansfield closed, many with intellectual disabilities have found better lives in group homes or other community settings. But the model has not been a panacea.

A Courant investigation has found that scores of developmentally disabled people have died in public and private group homes, institutions and nursing homes from 2004 through 2010 in cases due, investigators say, to abuse, neglect or medical error.

The Courant's review of the more than 100 deaths revealed systemic flaws in care, ranging from breakdowns in nursing to gaps in staff training to lapses in agency oversight.

The results are shocking and sad, and frustratingly unnecessary. Developmentally disabled people were scalded to death in bathtubs; choked to death on solid food while on ground-food diets; drowned when they shouldn't have been in the water; fatally injured in falls while on medication that affected their balance — deaths that easily could have been prevented.

This cannot continue. Caring for those who cannot care for themselves is one of the most basic duties of society. Here, the safety net is badly shredded.

One way to help correct the problem, advocates say, is to support families who want to care for their intellectually disabled sons and daughters at home. Beyond that, there must be better training and shared best practices in all facilities where clients reside. We urge the General Assembly to investigate.

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