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Mentally Ill Go To Homes Seen As Little Better

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When state officials moved in March to close Seaport Manor in Brooklyn, long one of New York's most notoriously troubled adult homes for the mentally ill, they pledged to do all they could to protect the safety and well-being of its nearly 300 residents.

But the home's discharge records and interviews with officials show that the state, in coordination with Seaport's management, has merely been relocating many of the profoundly ill residents to other adult homes that have their own histories of neglect. In one instance, the records show, a resident was delivered to a homeless shelter.

At least 18 residents have been sent from Seaport to the 240-bed King Solomon Manor in Jamaica, Queens, where state inspectors discovered last year that one resident wore urine-soaked clothing for days, while another was so poorly supervised that he had to be taken to an emergency room suffering from dehydration, according to an August 2001 report. One resident's room was infested with gnats, the report said, concluding that the home's care and cleanliness were chronically deficient.

The state has approved the transfer of another 12 Seaport residents to Brooklyn Manor in East New York, although state inspectors last August detailed a litany of severe violations against the home. They described how residents, disheveled and unbathed, wandered in and out of the 216-bed home. Some were made to do work in place of staff, including supervising the home.

Still other Seaport residents have been moved to Garden of Eden in Brooklyn, where inspectors recently found that the operator had routinely threatened residents; to Anna Erika in Staten Island, where medication was distributed so haphazardly that a resident had to be hospitalized after receiving the wrong pills; and to New Monsey Park in Monsey, N.Y., where, according to a 2001 state report, "numerous roaches in all stages of development and flies were observed in various locations of the building," especially its kitchen.

The fate of the Seaport residents suggests the challenges facing the Pataki administration as it vows to overhaul the state's for-profit adult homes, which for three decades have been a cornerstone of the mental health network, taking in discharged psychiatric patients as the

state has drastically scaled back its psychiatric wards. The homes now shelter 15,000 mentally ill people, most in the city and its suburbs.

Officials acknowledge that the state has allowed many of the homes to remain in disarray for so long that the system as a whole has become almost unsalvageable. Shut one home, and the residents often end up in a situation that is not much better.

There are other kinds of housing for the mentally ill, but waiting lists are usually long. A few Seaport residents went to nursing homes, but most went to adult homes.

In an interview on Friday, the state health commissioner, Dr. Antonia C. Novello, said that in the short term, she had little choice but to let Seaport residents move to other adult homes with poor conditions.

"I feel very constrained," she said. "Where do I put them?"

But Dr. Novello said she was determined to revamp the system, saying that she had begun personally making unannounced visits to adult homes, and had convened a high-level group of state officials, advocates and others to draft far-reaching reform proposals. "I want it greatly overhauled," she said. "I just need to know how we can do it."

The state's move to close down Seaport came after years of extensive violations at the home, from fraudulent record-keeping to uninvestigated suicides to complaints by workers that administrators were stealing money from residents. The New York Times, as part of a three-part series in April that detailed problems at many homes, found that conditions at Seaport were particularly grievous. For instance, the home recorded one death per month among residents from 1995 through 2001, and the average age of death was 58.

Two federal grand juries are hearing evidence as part of an investigation into Seaport.