

Crowd demands Griswold nursing home stay open

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Griswold, Conn. —

Furious residents, some of them near tears, overwhelmed a public hearing before the state Department of Social Services Tuesday and argued for more than an hour against closing Griswold's only nursing home.

More than 100 people jammed the hearing room, foyer and hallways of Griswold Healthcare & Rehabilitation Center, spilling outside even as it snowed. Company representatives tried to remove members of the press.

Genesis Healthcare, which manages the 90-bed facility at 97 Preston Road, sent a letter of intent to the Department of Social Services Jan. 12 seeking permission to close the home. Employees and members of the union representing 120 workers organized a petition drive opposing the closure and collected more than 1,000 signatures.

Patients who spoke Tuesday, many from wheelchairs, were near tears.



Jill Poole, a certified nurses aide at Griswold Healthcare and Rehabilitation Center talks to the media Tuesday, February 3, 2009 after a meeting on the future of the nursing home. To her right are Jessica Wojciechowski, Hillary Schroeder, both CNA's and Lorraine Pourd, an LPN.

"I don't think it's right what you're doing to us," said Alice D'andria, who has lived at the home seven years.

Ronald Martin said the center is the only home he has.

"We don't like to be tossed out and shoved around and put into places we don't know of," he said. "When you take that away from us, what do we have? We've got nothing."

Fixes too costly

Tom Quinn, regional vice president of operations for Genesis, said it would cost \$4.87 million to bring the building up to code. It needs a sprinkler system, generator and asbestos abatement. The septic system also has failed.

"These renovations and repairs are not affordable," he said.

Quinn spoke on behalf of Genesis, which manages the home and Omega Health Care, the property owner. Quinn said the nursing home has been operating at a loss of \$100,000 per month, and half the patients have left already.

Employees said there aren't enough beds for the patients elsewhere. They said family members moved their loved ones out of desperation, because they didn't want them to end up far away or in places they didn't like.

One woman said her mother, with all her faculties, was moved two weeks ago, and is now in a locked facility for Alzheimer's patients.

"She's in a lock-down unit. They do not listen," said Jeanne Miller. "We have asked her to be moved. They're feeding her things she doesn't like." Her voice broke.

Kimberly Quinn choked up as she spoke.

"You cannot shut this place," she began, then had to stop for a moment. Her mother has been here since September and has Alzheimer's. "She's going to get all mixed up and confused again," Quinn said.

Residents angrily testified the state knew the home didn't have sprinklers for years, but failed to enforce its own rules.

"I don't want to hear that bull," Ronald Becotte said. "These people from the state agencies need to go back into their own pockets before they close this facility."

The Rev. Lou Harper, pastor of the First Congregational Church of Griswold, said the state was supposed to correct the problems and failed.

"You messed it up. You fix it," he said.

First Selectman Philip Anthony, whose mother is in the facility, but who spoke for Griswold, said the company hasn't made improvements and the state has been grossly negligent. He said the company had to know the building had problems when it bought it; no intelligent person would believe otherwise.

Help from state

Rep. Steve Mikutel, D-Griswold, said the state should develop a financial recovery program, and work with the company to make the needed improvements.

Employees commented that workers had been through the nursing home in the past two weeks, painting and replacing fixtures to spruce it up prior to the public hearing.

Debra Chernoff, spokesman for New England Health Care Employees Union, District 1199, said 13 nursing homes have closed in the last five years. Ten are now in state receivership because of financial issues and a half dozen are in bankruptcy, she said.

Carolyn Orr, a patient, said what's happening hurts.

"It saddens me to see all my friends being taken away like orphans," she said.

What's next

The commissioner of the state Department of Social Services will review the request by Genesis Healthcare to close Griswold Healthcare & Rehabilitation Center.

Hearing Officer Rich Wysocki said Tuesday the review is a priority, but did not give a date on when it would be completed.



Griswold Healthcare and Rehabilitation Center employee Hillary Schroeder wears a sticker Tuesday, February 3, 2009 after a meeting on the future of the nursing home.

The Day

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State Hears Pleas: Don't Close Our Nursing Home

By [Judy Benson](#)

Published on 2/4/2009 in [Home](#) » [Main Photo](#)

Griswold - Wheelchair-bound residents and their relatives, nurses and other staff and at least three elected officials packed a public hearing at Griswold Healthcare & Rehabilitation Center Tuesday to tell the state Department of Social Services not to let the nursing home close.

First Selectman Philip Anthony Jr. was among those saying the state has an obligation to help finance the \$4.8 million in needed renovations because it had been “grossly negligent” in its oversight, inspecting the home annually but allowing the repairs to go undone for years under two previous owners.

Anthony visits his mother daily at the home. Residents and their families who spoke said that while the home may not be the fanciest or most modern, it has a homey atmosphere and caring staff that cannot be duplicated. Several became tearful.

”This facility has been my family for the last seven years, and it's hard when you're old to see changes. I think it's wrong for me to have to find another place,” said Alice D'Andria, who shared the front row of the hearing room with fellow residents in wheelchairs. She was the second of about 20 speakers arguing against the closure.

Ronald Martin, sitting two wheelchairs away, said: “We don't like to be tossed out and shoved around. We are cared for here. We love everybody here and everybody loves us. You take that away and what have we got? Nothing.”

Like other residents, their relatives and staff, he wore a “We Need An Extreme Makeover” sticker from the union representing workers, the phrase a reference to the reality television home-building show's project in neighboring Voluntown late last year. The union also gave patients and others at the hearing fliers describing their effort to protect the home from closure by meeting with state lawmakers at the Capitol twice last month.

Deborah Chernoff, communications director for the New England Health Care Employees Union District 1199, said 13 nursing homes have closed in the state in the last five years and 1,400 nursing home beds have been lost. The most vulnerable nursing homes are those with the highest percentage of Medicaid and Medicare patients, because the reimbursements are too low to pay for the cost of care, she said. About 88 percent of the Griswold home's residents are covered by

Medicare or Medicaid.

"This is not health care planning," she said. "It's survival of the financially fittest with residents, workers and towns left to suffer the fallout. In the long term, closure is bad public policy" that does not account for predicted future needs for long-term care.

About 100 people turned out during a snowstorm for the hearing, overflowing into the hallway and straining to hear the speakers in the community room. Nursing home and social service department administrators barred a Day photographer and television camera crews from entering the public hearing, citing privacy laws for patients. The Day has filed a Freedom of Information complaint over the matter.

The public hearing is required whenever the social services department considers a request from a nursing home operator to close a facility. Hearing Officer Rich Wysocki said Social Services Commissioner Michael Starkowski considers making a decision on the closure request a priority, but could not say when a decision would be made.

Genesis HealthCare, manager of the nursing home, along with operator and licensee TC Healthcare and property owner OHI Inc., are seeking to close the nursing home by March. They submitted a formal request on Jan. 12. Open since 1969, it is the town's only nursing home, and has strong ties to the community, several of the speakers said, recalling now-deceased grandparents and other relatives who spent the last days of their lives there.

"This facility is part of the town of Griswold. We can't replace it," said William Cymr, president of Griswold ambulance, recalling the care his grandmother once received there. "It's going to have an impact on the whole town."

That impact would extend to the 130 employees forced to look for other work, to the ambulance operations, which depend on the income from visiting the home three times a week, to the patients forced to transfer, he said.

Mary Jane Joyce, a nurse at the home for seven years, said the problems with the building have been well-known for many years and repairs have been neglected.

"If our government can bail out carmakers and banks and Wall Street, I think our state can bail out our elderly," she said.

Tom Quinn, vice president of operations for Genesis, made the only remarks in favor of the closure. Since taking over the nursing home in the fall, he said, his company has concluded that it would have to spend \$4.88 million to make required repairs, and that the 90-bed home is not generating sufficient revenues to support that. The state Department of Public Health is requiring the home be upgraded with a sprinkler system, new septic system, new nurse call system, asbestos abatement, a new generator, handicapped accessibility improvements and other repairs. The home also needs to be expanded so that each patient room has its own bathroom. Currently residents use hallway bathrooms.

Monthly expenses exceed revenues by \$100,000, he said. The current owners and operators took over the home this fall after its previous owners, Haven HealthCare, declared bankruptcy. No offers to buy the facility have been received. Another former Haven home, Haven Health Center of Waterford, closed in December, and about a half-dozen patients who moved to the Griswold home from there now face the possibility of a second move.

"We deeply regret the need to close Griswold but truly believe that there is no feasible alternative," Quinn said.

Since the company announced its plan, about 40 patients have already moved to other nursing homes or back home with home-health services, and 47 remain. Quinn said a survey last week showed there are 107 available nursing home beds within 15 miles of the Griswold facility.

Jenne Miller of Sprague said her mother was one of several patients who moved from the Griswold home last month to one in Uncasville. At the other home, she said, she and the others were inappropriately placed in a lock-down unit for patients with mental illness.

"She doesn't need to be there, but they don't listen," she said. "I'd love to see my mother come back here."

State Rep. Steven Mikutel, D-Griswold, and state Sen. Andrew Maynard, D-Stonington, also urged that the home stay open. Maynard said he feared the hearing was coming too late.

"It's almost like Kabuki theater," he said. "We're here to go through the motions but the decision has already been made. These are people's lives, and this isn't a process that serves our citizens well."

Griswold



A state Department of Social Services public hearing Tuesday at the Griswold Healthcare &

Rehabilitation Center concerning the request by owners to shut down Griswold's only nursing home drew scores of angry residents and their relatives opposed to the closing.



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By Tim Martin

Employees, residents and family members gather for a public hearing on the possible closure of the Griswold Healthcare & Rehabilitation Center at the facility on Tuesday. The state is considering closing the center because the cost of needed repairs would outweigh operating expenses.

