Gov. close to KNI decision

Parkinson to make decision prior to start legislative session

BY TIM CARPENTER
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Gov. Mark Parkinson is nearing a decision about the fate of Kansas Neurological Institute, a Topeka facility serving disabled adults slated for closure by a commission searching for operating efficiencies in state government.

The Democratic governor has the option of rejecting a recommendation by the Facilities Closure and Realignment Commission to close KNI. He also could issue executive orders to put into effect transfer of the Topeka institution's disabled residents to community-based residential programs or to Parsons State Hospital. Implementation orders signed by Parkinson could be blocked by one chamber of the Republican-controlled Legislature.

"I'm in my due diligence phase, where I'm learning as much as I can about it," Parkinson said in a recent interview. "I toured KNI. I met with the parent groups."

Parkinson said the goal was to issue a decision on KNI before the House and Senate convened Jan. 10.

"I want this issue to be resolved before we get into the legislative session," the governor said.

Advocates of consolidation estimate the state could free up about $5 million annually while providing Kansans with disabilities housing options in less-restrictive settings.

Questions have been raised about finding appropriate community- or home-based living arrangements for a minimum of one-third of 350 people residing at Parsons and KNI, but organizations involved in serving this clientele believe services would be available to meet demand as the state gradually consolidated at Parsons.

The state's history of closing other state hospitals offers insight into how best to serve each individual's interests while meeting the state's needs, said Rocky Nichols, executive director of the Disability Rights Center of Kansas.

"We are at a historic crossroads," he said.

The commission recommended all savings from phasing out KNI be directed at expanding in-home services to thousands of disabled people on waiting lists in Kansas. In addition, proceeds from the sale of KNI property in Topeka ought to be dedicated to shrinking waiting lists.

Commission chairwoman Rochelle Chronister said disabled Kansans who made the move out of large institutions had been shown to thrive in new surroundings.

"That is where people are most successful, even people who are the most severely handicapped," she said.

Critics of the recommendation on KNI have expressed concern about relocating profoundly disabled people.
Ann Perrin Riggs, of Topeka, is guardian of a mentally disabled 28-year-old man residing at KNI. Moving him to Parsons could be problematic, she said.

"Topeka is his community," she said.

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