Pacheco hopes to stop closure of Neuro-Rehabilitation Center

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MIDDLEBORO — Despite the fact that Wingate Healthcare Community, the ownership group of Neuro-Rehabilitation Center (NRC) at Middleboro, announced last month that it would be closing the Middleboro facility at the end of November, Senator Marc Pacheco (D, Taunton) is hoping to forestall that action.

"I am cautiously optimistic that we may be able to see an extraordinarily better alternative for the facility than closure," said Sen. Pacheco during a phone call Friday. "I can't say technically the whole thing is on hold, but in essence, it is."

Sen. Pacheco said that he has reached out to Secretary of Health and Human Services, Dr. JudyAnn Bigby, and has spoken with the ownership group to see if they would be willing to withdraw the closure plan. He is in hopes that the state can come up with an appropriate fee structure for the facility that would allow it to remain open.

"The state hasn't come up with an appropriate rate for patient care — these are patients who require a high level of service — and the operator is running at a deficit, as a piece of business. From a human point of view, it's right to provide the care the patients need. From a business point of view, though, they're operating at a net loss, in terms of funding," he said.

The NRC has operated in Middleboro since 1984, serving patients with acquired brain injuries and other neurological disorders. New services available to many patients help them to successfully integrate back into the community with services in their own homes or in residential group homes that cater to brain injury patients. Sen. Pacheco explained that a facility that could operate with the cost for services spread over 100 beds would have difficulty when those beds start to empty as the patients move into other living arrangements, because the money follows the patients.

In December of 2008, Wingate Healthcare filed a plan to close the facility because of the financial burden. However, in the ensuing months the facility was able to reach a settlement with the state that included increased reimbursement rates based on the level of patient care required.
Sue Gauthier, NRC administrator, said last month that the staff remains committed to providing exceptional care until the last patient leaves the facility. She noted that the community care options that are available now offer many of the patients a more normalized setting than the institutional care setting that the facility has provided.

There are more than 100 patients at NRC at Middleboro, the majority of whom are under 60 — three are younger than 20. Arlene Korab, executive director of the Brain Injury Association of Massachusetts, said she believes it will be difficult to find appropriate placement for all of the patients in such a short time.

"This is indicative of a bigger problem — the lack of long-term care facilities for survivors of brain injury," she said. "This situation has the potential to stress acute care and rehabilitation hospitals across the state."

"It's really about coming up with a different strategy, because there are needs in the area for this population," Sen. Pacheco said.

Sen. Pacheco believes those needs are increasing, as military personnel return with brain injuries and post traumatic stress disorder. He suggested that programmatic changes at the NRC facility, coupled with rate changes from the state, could enable the needs of the patients to continue to be met.

"So many families are scared, they don't know what to do with their family members. If this facility closes, it could mean going to another facility, maybe Worcester? They are very concerned, and they're looking for answers — I want them to know there's a new light on. The door is not closed. There are real discussions going on. I think there are ways we can save the services for this region," he said.

Representative Keiko Orrall (R, Lakeville) said her office is also working to see if there is a way to help the business stay open, but has been told from the Health and Human Services department that there is not a lot that can be done, as the NRC is a private business and is not controlled by the state.

"I have been contacted by several constituents who are very concerned about the situation, and we will be exploring all options to see if there is a way to help this business stay open," she said. "The state is doing as much as it can. There is a need for this service, and they will be doing all they can to place these people in facilities that are equipped to handle the level of care that they require."

Attempts to reach Wingate Healthcare officials and representatives from Sec. Bigby's office were unsuccessful at press time.