

N.J. scraps Return Home program for disabled adults

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AP FILE PHOTO
Senate President Stephen Sweeney

More than 300 people with developmental disabilities will no longer be forced to leave out-of-state residential programs under a deal announced Monday between the Christie administration and Senate leaders.

The deal, ending the controversial Return Home New Jersey program, caps months of protests from families, rising pressure from lawmakers and a cascade of publicity that had threatened to

seep into national media coverage of Governor Christie's bid for his party's presidential nomination.

"Families will be able to sleep a hell of a lot better," said Senate President Stephen Sweeney, D-Gloucester, in a Monday afternoon news conference announcing an accord reached between legislators and the Christie administration.

Sweeney and a handful of other senators, including Fair Lawn's Bob Gordon, spent the past month working with Christie and his office to find a compromise on the issue. The program, started in 2009 under Gov. Jon Corzine, required disabled adults living in out-of-state specialized care facilities to be brought back to New Jersey whether they wanted to or not. Many have been living out of state for decades because there weren't facilities in New Jersey that could handle their particular needs.

"Today we are announcing a return to sanity and a return to compassion," Gordon said.

The bill lawmakers announced Monday would bar the state from transferring individuals who object to it in writing. There are certain exceptions, such as if the individual has not applied to or enrolled in the state Medicaid program, the individual switches providers or the out-of-state facility is deemed unsafe.

One father in Bergen County was brought to tears when he heard the news. "We've been praying for something like this," said the man, who requested anonymity because he still worried that his 28-year-old daughter could be targeted in future cuts.

Many families had hired attorneys and testified at state hearings to keep their relatives in their facilities.

"I feel like we won," said Robyn Levine of Mahwah, whose 30-year-old daughter Ashley has been at the same facility in New York for 13 years. "I feel like we hit a home run."

Other families were still worried.

Philip Passantino of Totowa said he worried his stepdaughter Mary Alice, who has autism, would still be forced to leave the program in Pennsylvania where she has spent her life, because she is not eligible for Medicaid.

“I’m just skeptical of any deal,” he said. “I wonder whether it will affect me and how fast will it help. My family is in bad shape.”

The Christie administration addressed the deal in an emailed statement.

“Last week, Governor Christie met in his office with families and individuals affected by the Return Home program to personally discuss their concerns and how to best address them,” wrote deputy press secretary Nicole Sizemore. “In that meeting, the governor agreed with the need for sensible changes that ensure the safety and well-being of every New Jersey resident residing in an out-of-state placement. It is encouraging to see those changes are reflected in the legislation being proposed by lawmakers today, and we look forward to continuing our work together on behalf of these families.”

The deal was a rare truce in a standoff over sweeping changes in the way the state pays for services for people with developmental disabilities. State officials are working to bring New Jersey’s programs for the developmentally disabled in line with a widely embraced belief that people with such conditions as intellectual disabilities, autism and cerebral palsy would do better in their own communities, closer to their families.

Besides the controversy with those who were living in other states, protests flared last year when the state closed two state-run institutions for the developmentally disabled, including the North Jersey Developmental institution in Totowa. And several families, lawmakers and service providers are organizing against a plan to cut off state financing to any new housing projects in which all the units are for people with special needs. The state would instead only invest in complexes where less than 25 percent of the apartments are dedicated to the disabled.

Assemblywoman Valerie Vainieri Huttel, D-Englewood, said the compromise on Return Home New Jersey bodes well for the possibility of an accord on the more controversial aspects of the transition plan. “The voices of the voiceless have been heard,” she said. “They haven’t been heard for a long time.”

Senate Majority Leader Loretta Weinberg, D-Teaneck, said the deal represented a recognition of the complexity of the issue. “I don’t believe there is any policy affecting the developmentally disabled that could be a one-size-fits-all,” she said. “There are too many variables.”

As of March, 387 individuals were living in facilities as far away as Wisconsin. The Return Home New Jersey program would affect the fewest people among the programs in question –

nearly 28,000 are eligible to receive services through the state Division of Developmental Disabilities, according to state data.

About 170 people have been brought back to New Jersey already. But over the last several months, dozens of families have protested the moves, calling them disruptive and in some cases medically dangerous and saying that New Jersey does not have the adequate facilities to provide the level of care provided elsewhere.

Mike Cole of Harrington Park, one of three family representatives involved in the talks, described the decision as “amicable.”

“A lot of committed people got together, and that was a very big driving force for this meeting,” said Cole, who was there on behalf of his sister Jane. “There were no hysterics, no demands. Just a look at the facts of this thing, and the facts speak for themselves.”

The legislation is expected to be introduced in the Senate on Thursday. The Assembly is not expected to meet again for some time, but the chamber is expected to swiftly pass a version of the legislation.

Regardless, Sweeney and Kean both said the Christie administration is moving forward as if the bill were law.

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