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Senate of Pennsylvania

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The Honorable Tom Wolf
Governor of Pennsylvania
225 Main Capitol Building
Harrisburg, PA 17120

Dear Governor Wolf:

I am writing to express my deep concerns, frustration, and fears for residents' lives following your Administration's announcement of the planned closure of Polk State Center. And I am formally and personally asking you to reverse course and allow the residents to remain in their safe, comfortable home in the Polk Community, as is their choice, by stopping this wrong-headed decision.

As someone who is intimately familiar with the long-term history, operation and successes of Polk Center, I want to share with you a few of my thoughts and observations as your Administration embarks upon removing nearly 200 individuals from their chosen homes at Polk.

I am concerned with the safety of the fragile and vulnerable residents when moved to group homes. Today's residents at Polk are profoundly in need of daily assistance, more so than in past generations since over the years many highly functioning individuals have chosen other living arrangements than Polk Center. A majority of today's Polk Center residents have dual diagnoses of Mental Health (MH) and Intellectual Disabilities (ID), and may as well have other physical health challenges. Polk Center provides easy access to around the clock professionals in all of these fields. In addition, direct care workers who have long term commitments to serving these residents, rather than the "revolving door" high staff turnaround in other residential settings, ensures that Polk Center is stable environment with care provided by staff who become intimately aware of each individual resident's needs and proclivities. Polk Center really does provide a family bonding experience between staff and residents.

I am deeply troubled by the threat to the stability in the lives of Polk Center residents as their home and familiar environment is forcibly taken away. This upheaval borders on cruel treatment of fragile individuals and their families who made difficult decisions years ago to move to Polk with stability and high quality care as their foundation. Now, that option is being taken away. Certainly, there will be setbacks for individual residents' health and well-being by this sudden unexpected change. On my recent visit to Polk Center, administrators concurred that the announcement has upset many residents and impacted their daily life care.

Yes, accidents can happen anywhere and standards of care can sometimes fall below acceptable levels, but the large number of highly professional staff at Polk allows for continuous vigilance and transparency by multiple round-the-clock staff levels, not to mention the numerous legally required Patient Advocates, and the copious number of Federal and State Inspectors, Auditors, Regulators from various agencies that provide constant oversight at Polk Center. Fewer sets of eyes are continuously looking out for these vulnerable residents in other settings.

Moving forward, in the absence of residences like Polk Center, (which seems to be the direction that you are moving the state), I get deeply concerned that no solid, stable, safety-net care option will exist for individuals and families. In the course of a lifetime, individuals change and a once successful "other" community care option may someday become unsuccessful for the individual. Where will they turn if more profound services are suddenly needed? Today, Polk Center exists as a backdrop in cases when another community setting no longer works because of changing needs of the individual or even problems in the operation/safety of another particular community setting itself. What about families who as primary care providers may at some point reach a crisis situation or who need temporary respite help? Today Polk Center exists as a quick, stable safety-net option.

Polk Center is an integrated Community home setting surrounded by understanding, loving neighbors. Social lives, freedoms, employment, safety, stability and personal growth are all present in the residents' everyday lives. The residents' families agree with this assessment, which is why they maintain their decision of living at Polk even when other options exist.

I must also point out that this short sighted decision seems to be driven by a utopian viewpoint that does not match the real world. I am profoundly worried that widespread movement to the other settings will have unintended consequences on other social service providers as well as result in former residents ending up in the criminal justice system where they do not belong. Decisions based on apparent (though dubious) short term savings can turn out to be much more costly in total.

The Greater Venango County Community has seen more than its fair share of job losses and economic setbacks of the past few decades, mostly by downsizings, moves, and closures of private sector employers. Polk Center is now the County's largest employer with 700+ employees—all public sector positions whose existence is totally controlled by the State Executive Branch. There are few local options for continued employment for the staff members at Polk Center. This is another devastating economic blow, but you can stop it in its tracks.

This sudden and unexpected closure announcement without adequate plans in place (even Polk Center's Site Administrator was herself uninvolved in any pre planning) has disrupted our entire community. **I am again personally imploring you to slam the brakes on this ill-advised decision. Only you can stop this terrible course of action.**

Sincerely,



Scott E. Hutchinson
State Senator, 21st District