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# OPINION

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## No reason to keep Southbury Training School open

By Deborah A. Dorfman

Southbury Training School, a long-standing Connecticut institution for people with intellectual disabilities, is slated to remain open even though it costs in excess of \$500,000 annually for each of its 127 residents, the Courant recently reported.

Sadly, this decision demonstrates how Connecticut, often a leader, has fallen woefully behind other states when it comes to administering its programs and services for people with intellectual disabilities — particularly in providing residents of institutions opportunities to make informed choices whether to move to the community with appropriate services and supports.

It is true that residents at Southbury, for the most part, are elderly, have lived for decades there, and many have complex medical and/or behavioral support needs. Those factors, however, do not mean that they cannot or should not transition to the community.

Many states have dramatically reduced institutional care, and at least 14 have eliminated all of their institutions for people with intellectual disabilities. In fact, Connecticut has successfully closed New Haven and Seaside Regional Centers and Mansfield Training School. There is no reason why Connecticut cannot do the same with Southbury.

The now-closed institutions served individuals with similar needs in terms of behavioral support, medical care and age to those at Southbury. These individuals transitioned successfully and have lived an improved quality of life in their communities.

The Connecticut provider community is qualified and experienced to safely support resi-



Many parents of developmentally disabled adults point to the extremely high cost of keeping Southbury Training School open as a significant barrier to serving more people with residential placements. **COURANT FILE**

dent of Southbury.

Significantly, there is a substantial body of professional literature showing that with the right planning and provision of necessary services in the community, people with intellectual disabilities, including those with severe/profound disabilities, and including those who are older adults, can successfully transition to the community and experience a substantially improved quality of life.

A 1996 study conducted by James Conroy, Ph.D., of the outcomes for people with intellectual disabilities who transitioned from Connecticut's now-closed Mansfield Training School found that these individuals experienced "extremely

positive" outcomes and improvements in a wide range of areas, including adaptive behavior, individualized treatment and integration, among others.

The benefits of deinstitutionalization not only improve the lives of the people moving to the community and their families but also likely improve the lives of those individuals waiting for services from the Department of Developmental Services.

The annual cost of care for each individual at Southbury, exceeding \$500,000, is exorbitant, particularly when one considers the cost to serve the same individuals in the community would be about \$200,000 per year.

If Connecticut were to transition the residents at Southbury to

the community with the appropriate services, the savings could be used to provide the urgently needed services to those individuals with intellectual disabilities who are on waiting lists and need services to ensure that they receive the support to remain safely in the community and avoid risk of institutionalization.

According to the Department of Developmental Services' Management Report, as of December 2022 there were 677 people with intellectual disabilities without funding for services deemed to be at "urgent" or "emergent" need for services.

The report also showed that an additional 251 people who, although they had Department of Developmental Services-funded

residential supports, were at urgent or emergent need of additional services. There were also 870 projected by the department to need services in two or more years.

The passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act in 1990, and later the U.S. Supreme Court's decision in the landmark case *Olmstead v. L.C.*, brought great promise to people with disabilities — including intellectual disabilities — that they would have opportunities to decide whether they wanted to transition to the community from institutional living.

Among the quality-of-life factors they'd likely consider is safety, given the recent arrest of two Southbury employees charged with intentional cruelty regarding injuries suffered by a 79-year-old that required hospitalization.

Unfortunately, Connecticut has not fulfilled the promise of *Olmstead* — especially with respect to people with intellectual disabilities. The good news, however, is that it is not too late for Connecticut to change course.

To do so, Connecticut should reconsider its decision to maintain Southbury Training School and take steps to expand the state's existing capacity to provide community services and supports to people with intellectual disabilities, including those who are elderly and/or have complex medical needs.

*Deborah A. Dorfman is executive director/Attorney, Disability Rights Connecticut. This was written on behalf of advocacy organizations Disability Rights Connecticut, The Arc of Connecticut, Connecticut State Independent Living Council, Independence Northwest, and Western Connecticut Association for Human Rights.*

### LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

#### Restaurant staff needs a fair wage

A recent op-ed piece defending the present practice of restaurant tipping misses the mark.

Tipping is an antiquated system of allowing restaurant owners to keep control of workers and food prices. Customers are told that tipping is needed to keep prices down and allow workers a fair wage. This is not true. All tipping does is increase profits for restaurant owners and shortchange workers.

Restaurant staff should be paid a fair wage just like every other worker. These employees should not have to rely on a customer for their pay. It is the owner's responsibility to compensate the staff fairly. Workers should know in advance what they are getting. They have bills to pay just like everyone else and should be assured a living wage.

Having to rely on the whim of a customer for a tip puts an unfair burden on staff to tolerate abuse in hopes of a decent monetary compensation. And conversely, customers should not have to be forced to tip if the service is not satisfactory.

Restaurant owners are always complaining that they can't get help, and they threaten that if tips are removed prices will go up. Maybe they need to think more about how their selfish attitude looks to the public and the staff they say they want to keep.

**Diane Carney, Newington**

#### Funding state colleges creates brighter futures

The future of our state depends on how we fund the Connecticut State Colleges and Universities System.

We have two options. We can fully fund the Connecticut State Universities and community colleges, thereby containing tuition costs and supporting our students so they can complete their degrees.

Those students will go on to be happier, healthier and more productive citizens and have more opportunities because of their education. They will keep our state's economic engine running.

Or we can underfund the system. If we do not fully fund the CSUs and community colleges, we will see higher tuition costs leading to greater numbers of students leaving college or taking on insurmountable loans. Such cuts will further increase inequality in our state and slow down our economic growth.

As a professor of gerontology, I worry about what will happen if our leaders choose the latter option.

Disadvantages earlier in life impact health, longevity and quality of life as we age. As one of the fastest aging states, we need to make sure our citizens can age healthily and save for retirement.

Underfunding public education increases inequality that accumulates over the life course. We will see the negative

impacts for decades. When the middle and working classes receive narrow job training while the upper middle class and wealthy have access to liberal arts, science literacy, writing and critical thinking, then our educational system is no longer an engine of social mobility but one that reproduces and perpetuates disadvantage.

Our institutions of public higher education are part of a system in our state that is supposed to set up our children to thrive from birth to death. But if we are not fully funded, and instead receive massive cuts, we will fail at our goal. Our students will be saddled with debt, or worse — leave and lose out on the lifetime of higher wages that having higher education provides. This will make it far more difficult for them to build careers, form families, buy houses and save for retirement.

We have a choice to make. Do we want a state where we can grow and thrive from birth to death, or do we want a system with a few wealthy people and destitution for the rest of us? Gov. Ned Lamont and the state legislature talk an awful lot about equity. It is time for them to back up their words by fully funding all our educational institutions. Our students, our neighbors, and the working people of this state deserve better.

**Madeline St. Amour**

*The writer is the director of communications for The Connecticut State University American Association of University Professors (CSU-AAUP).*

#### Conservative think tank should think differently

Why the Courant allows slanted misinformation from groups like Heritage Foundation, a conservative think tank, to frame issues the way they want to sway public opinion boggles my mind.

Trying to say that today's youth will have to suck it up and end up with a watered-down plan, higher costs, wait years longer to even apply for it, is refusing to look at other alternatives out there to finance it.

Part A Hospital costs are now free. Part B is what your premium pays for. While employees pay 1.45 percent of their incomes to the fund, their employer pays another 1.45 percent. Anyone figure out what slight increases while working will provide? Medicare now accounts for 10 percent of the entire budget of the United States.

I can think of so many other areas in that budget that could be cut without eliminating this valuable benefit that Americans have relied on since 1965 when President Lyndon Johnson signed it into effect 20 years after President Harry Truman first proposed it.

Let the folks at the Heritage Foundation Think Tank think of ways to save it, not just cut it and finally eliminate it the way they have always wanted.

**Pam Bergren, Glastonbury**

#### Rennie

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"His decision represents the vindication of the rule of law over all who would betray it with hatred and violence," said Ethel Kennedy and seven of her children about Newsom's decision. "By reaffirming that freedom is dependent on responsibility, the Governor protects Californians and people around the world — and that is in the tradition, and faithful to the legacy, of Robert Kennedy."

The 1968 California primary was held on the first anniversary of the Six Day War — a conflict that began with Israel's response to Egyptian prov-

ocations and ended with the Jewish state inflicting simultaneous defeats on Egypt, Syria and Jordan. Sirhan was in a fury that Kennedy supported sending advanced fighter jets to Israel and incensed by Jews and their supporters in Los Angeles celebrating the anniversary of Israel's victory. Sirhan took his gun, went to the Ambassador Hotel. He fired three shots into Kennedy, a fatal one entering his head. Sirhan wounded five others.

Kennedy was the hope of millions in 1968. He'd assumed the mantle of his martyred brother who had been assassinated in Dallas five years before by another 24-year-old nobody, Lee Harvey Oswald. Sirhan

changed the course of American history. Kennedy might not have won the Democratic nomination at a convention controlled by his nemesis President Lyndon Baines Johnson. (Johnson kept asking aides if Kennedy was dead yet as he waited to address the nation on the shooting.) Whether or not Kennedy was elected president in November, it requires no labored counterfactual of history to conclude that Kennedy would have influenced the course of what followed that wretched year.

I include the ages of Sirhan and Oswald because an ill-judged bill in the legislature would give the parole board expanded authority to reduce the sentences of convicted inmates between the

ages of 18 and 24. Adolescents are under the age of 18 and the Constitution of the United States precludes the imposition of a life sentence on them, no matter how barbaric the crime. Adolescents, the Supreme Court ruled in 2012, are reckless, impulsive and "heedless of risk-taking." An adolescent may be considerably more receptive to rehabilitation, the Court concluded.

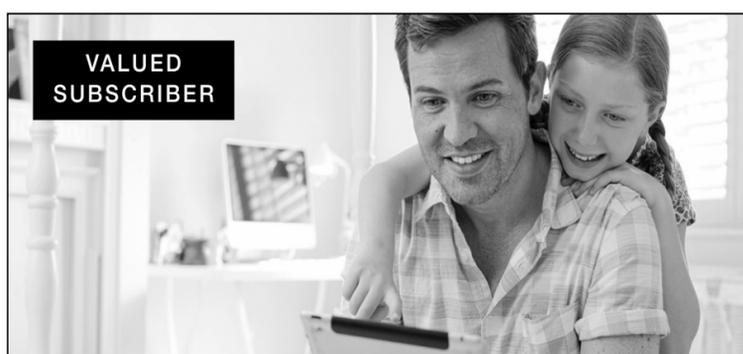
The proposal before the legislature would apply the elements of adolescents to young adults, ones like Sirhan and Oswald. A 24-year-old is an adult, not an adolescent. It would be a mistake to allow the state's parole board the discretion to unleash convicts not long after they have been convicted and sentenced

to long sentences for heinous crimes.

The wounds inflicted on victims and their families should not be treated as irritants. Our state constitution gives victims rights, too. If a panel of three members of the parole board agrees to release a violent criminal long before his sentence has been served, victims and the public ought to have some recourse to an elected official.

The governor should become the final safeguard against injustice.

*Kevin F. Rennie, of South Windsor, is a lawyer and a former Republican state senator and representative.*



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