

Disability pact, talks criticized

Advocates for residents of institutions say they want input on changes at state living centers

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This spring, Texas officials announced that they had reached an agreement with the U.S. Department of Justice on fixing problems at institutions for people with mental disabilities, thereby avoiding a lengthy legal battle.

On Thursday, advocates for Tex-

ans with disabilities said they were excluded from the negotiations that profoundly affect them. At a Capitol news conference and in a letter to state and federal officials, they asked to be included as the changes are made.

"The metrics of success need to be in human terms, not in paperwork terms," said Dennis Borel, executive director of the Coalition of Texans with Disabilities.

The settlement followed a federal investigation that found that Texas' 13 state supported living centers — formerly called state schools —

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Julian Cordova, 50, of Converse uses a communication device to speak at a news conference, organized by groups that advocate for Texans with disabilities, on Thursday at the Capitol to voice concerns about a settlement between the Department of Justice and the state concerning institutions.

PACT: Groups want residents to be able to move into community

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failed to provide adequate care or to protect residents from harm. The agreement calls for hiring more workers and speeding up abuse and neglect investigations. State lawmakers this year also required video cameras in common areas and created an independent ombudsman's office.

"We look forward to working with community stakeholders on the successful implementation of our agreement with the State of Texas," said Alejandro Miyar, a spokesman for the Department of Justice. "This settlement is a major step forward in protecting Texans with disabilities from imminent, serious harm."

The advocacy groups, including the Arc of Texas and Advocacy Inc., said the agreement doesn't do enough to ensure that residents have the opportunity to move into community



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Charlie Jurek of San Antonio, who lived for decades in state institutions, participated Thursday in the news conference. He was there to express his support for independent-living options.

settings. San Antonio resident Charlie Jurek, who spent 35 years in state institutions in Austin and San Antonio, held up a key to his apartment to show his enthusiasm for living

independently.

But Cecilia Fedorov, a spokeswoman for the Department of Aging and Disability Services, said the department has "a very aggressive ap-

proach to ensure that current residents get all of the information they need about community options," and that the population of the institutions has declined from about 5,000 to 4,550 in the past two years.

She said also that "there have been numerous opportunities for all interested Texans to voice their opinions and to help shape the plan for improving the state centers."

"That will absolutely continue," Fedorov said.

State Rep. Abel Herrero, D-Robstown, said that he shares in the advocacy groups' frustrations because he didn't have input in the settlement, either.

"The state would serve itself well by opening the details of the implementation to all those affected," said Herrero, vice chairman of the House Committee on Human Services.

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