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DHH closing the Northeast Supports and Services Center in Ruston

BY JOHNNY GUNTER • JGUNTER@THENEWSSTAR.COM • APRIL 27, 2010

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The same day that the state Inspector General's Office issued its investigative report on excessive overtime hours at the Department of Health and Hospitals' Northeast Supports and Services Center, DHH announced it is closing the Ruston facility and consolidating it with the Northwest Center in Bossier City.

There are 202 staff members at the facility, formerly known as the Ruston Developmental Center for the mentally challenged.

Assistant Secretary for Persons with Disabilities Kathy Kliebert said the employees will either transfer to other state facilities or go into the private sector. The Ruston Center has existed since 1959.

The media had reported in 2008 that overtime hours were extreme at the facility, which was then followed by an internal investigation that led to the resignation of administrator Freddie Williford.

Jim Plank, formerly with the G.B. Cooley Services in Ouachita Parish, has been the administrator for the past 11 months "to address a multitude of issues," according to Kliebert. There have been reports, she said, of neglect abuse at the facility.

The state Inspector General's Office issued a report Tuesday on its investigation of overtime for calendar year 2008 at the Ruston Center.

Inspector General Stephen Street said the investigation revealed a healthcare facility that, "at best, kept employees at their posts past when any normal person could function effectively to serve the patients. "At worst, our findings paint a picture of a DHH facility where employee time records lack credibility."

The report showed:

n Ten employees at DHH's Northeast Supports and Services Center in Ruston were paid more than \$407,000 for more than 23,000 hours of questionable overtime in 2008. These overtime hours equal the hours that more than 11 additional full-time employees would work if they put in eight-hour days over the course of a year.

n The 10 employees routinely reported working more than 16 hours a day, working back-to-back days with less than six hours off between shifts, and working as many as 82 consecutive days.

For example, one employee reported he worked 33 consecutive hours and separately that he worked 41.5

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hours in a 42-hour period.

Another employee reported she worked 59 hours in a 66-hour span of time.

A third employee reported she worked 34.5 consecutive hours. She also reported having worked more than 20 hours a day on 14 different dates in 2008, and having worked consecutive 82 days.

n Time entries in the Integrated Statewide Information Systems (ISIS) database by DHH timekeepers did not always match employee time sheets. The dramatic amount of overtime, combined with the mismatched time entries, raise serious questions as to whether the employees actually worked all the hours claimed, the report stated.

Kliebert said that DHH instituted seven recommendations made by the inspector general and that the move to Bossier City should be complete by the end of this year.

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