

An anachronism, a cobbler and Alice

HIGHLIGHTS

Sonoma Development Center is a relic of another era

Gov. Jerry Brown announced its inevitable closure by 2018, the end of his administration

What will come of the 403 remaining residents is to be determined



Lisa Glover, who works as a cobbler for the Sonoma Developmental Center, demonstrates a pair of shoes she made for a resident of the center. The center is scheduled to close by 2018 under a proposal by Gov. Jerry Brown. | **Hector Amezcua** - hamezcua@sacbee.com

BY DAN MORAIN
dmorain@sacbee.com

On Lisa Glover's shop wall, there's a black-and-white photo from the early 1900s of a mustachioed cobbler named Mr. White instructing young men in the craft of shoemaking at the California Home for the Care and Training of the Feeble Minded.

Like Mr. White a century ago, Glover builds shoes for feet that do not look or function in any normal way, for residents of the same place. It opened in 1891, long before Sonoma became renowned for opulent wineries. Though it long since was antiseptically renamed the Sonoma Developmental Center, it is a relic.

Gov. Jerry Brown made official the inevitable two weeks ago when he released his revised budget saying the center would close by 2018, and set aside \$49.3 million to "begin development of resources to support the transition of Sonoma residents."

"I don't think it's clear how this will play out," Glover said. "My job is to come to work like it is a brand new day. And that is what I do."

Glover was working on a pair of tiny shoes for a resident. The person's foot is twisted so that the ankle points downward. The individual cannot walk, but can scoot in a wheelchair. The shoes will have taken 40 hours to make.

She learned the craft from masters. In past budget crises, other cobblers left. Now the only cobbler, Glover, who has passed her 30-year mark with the state, has no apprentice. "I am proud of the work that I do," she said. But the job "is not just about me."

She walks to her car at the end of the day. Sonoma Development Center residents never will be able to do that. But because of shoes she makes, they can walk pain-free, propel themselves in their wheelchairs, or have their feet protected from bruises.

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Lisa Glover, a cobbler at the Sonoma Developmental Center

Walk the grounds with director Karen Faria, and you can't help but notice the huge brick building that could be an Ivy League college administration building, old oaks on the 900 acres that abut Jack London State Historic Park and, of course, the people.

There were 403 residents last week. The youngest is 23. The oldest is 91. Two were in hospice care. Many have scars on their heads from surgery or injury. This has been their home for most if not all of their lives.

In one room, disco music played as two nurses rotated among a half-dozen people in what they called a class. These people never have talked or walked, though they all had specially fitted shoes. Most had breathing devices. They lay on their sides, bellies or backs in chairs fabricated to fit their twisted bodies' contours.

One man smiled at a wind-up bunny propped up next to him. He was in his 20s. One career-long employee, Jorge Fernandez, said he used to hold him when he was an infant. When a woman emitted a guttural noise, one of the nurses answered by stroking her brow. They'd stay for two hours, and a new class would arrive.

In an airy activity room, a higher functioning middle-aged man sat at a touch-screen monitor, sorting electronic images of pennies, nickels, dimes and quarters. Another woman sorted dice by color: green, white, red. Some were belted into wheelchairs. Some wore helmets.

Alice used to walk, but now one of her feet is rigid and she uses a wheelchair. She took time to show off her shoes, which look a little like Uggs, Glover's handiwork.

She has a photo of Grupo Bronco above her bed and loves county fairs. Once a month, Wilkin Brinson drives 85 miles from his home in Lodi to visit Alice, his baby sister. He brings her Cheetos and magazines.

Brinson, 77, said his father became ill with cancer and his mother could not handle Alice. In 1957, his mother brought Alice to Sonoma. Brinson wonders what might have happened if Alice spent the past 58 years living on the outside. But now she is almost 71.

"For her to have to say goodbye, I don't know where she is going. I don't know who is going to take of her," said Brinson, a retired Lodi schools janitor.

The Lanterman Developmental Disabilities Services Act of 1969, one of the laws that sets California apart from other states, spells out our obligation to Alice and people like her who have intellectual disabilities, cerebral palsy, autism and other such maladies. Every parent's disabled child qualifies, no matter the family's station.

The act says developmentally disabled people have a right to care in the least restrictive setting. That meant Sonoma, like other state hospitals, would close one day. The one surprise is that they've lasted this long.

The Department of Developmental Services is responsible for serving 290,000 people. Most live with their families, in apartments or in small group homes or private nursing homes. About 1,000 live in Sonoma and two other developmental centers in Porterville and Orange County.

In the fiscal year beginning in July, Brown proposes to spend \$5.9 billion to care for the 290,000 people. The math makes clear why Sonoma will close. Almost 10 percent of the \$5.9 billion, \$530 million, is needed to operate the developmental centers.

As the population dwindles, the per-patient cost becomes astronomical: \$530,000 per resident per year. Adding to the pressure, the feds decertified some of Sonoma's housing units, cutting \$1.4 million a month in aid, and want all states to close the remaining state hospitals.

Audits and inspections documented failings including patient abuse. Neglect led to deaths, as detailed by the Center for Investigative Reporting, although private nursing homes, where some of the people likely will end up, are hardly utopian settings.

All that will be sorted out in the next three years. Brown's top health officials pledge to oversee the transition, however that might play out for the remaining 403 people. Closure is inevitable. Like all relics, Sonoma Development Center's time has passed. For now, Alice has shoes.

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