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## Shock, grief, anger over abrupt plans to close Goddard nursing home in Jamaica Plain

Posted by Matt Rocheleau August 2, 2012 03:04 PM

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By Matt Rocheleau, Town Correspondent

Patients, their families, and staff of the state's oldest nursing home remain shocked, distressed and angered over the Jamaica Plain facility's abrupt plans to shut down next month.

The trustee board of the 163-year-old nonprofit that runs the Goddard House Skilled Nursing and Rehabilitation Center [announced the closure](#) three weeks ago. The more than 100 patients and the 135 workers who provide them with 24-hour care will be gone by Sept. 8.

Ellen Jones is in disbelief. The building has been the 83-year-old's home for the past three years.

She met her boyfriend at Goddard.

"It just happened. I came to love him very much," she said as her voice trembled

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He was relocated last week to a different nursing home than where she is going. Jones does not know if she will ever see him or most of her other friends again.

“We were supposed to be here permanently, until we died,” she said in a phone interview Tuesday, one day before her scheduled move to another nursing home.

The looming closure has prompted a lot of painful goodbyes.

Patients and staff received 60 days notice, the minimum required by federal regulations, according to the state Department of Public Health. Goddard’s board has vowed to do all it can to help with the transition, including working with patients’ families, holding multiple job fairs and giving workers bonus pay.

Lisa Caruso, medical director at Goddard and chief of geriatrics at Boston Medical Center, called the shutdown “devastating.”

For patients, she said, such sudden change “can be traumatic and have a detrimental impact on their health.”

“The employees are highly skilled at their jobs at the nursing home, but it’s not like there are a lot of openings in that sector,” she added. “Nobody’s having an easy time finding another job.”

Caruso and others are at odds over the reasons given by the organization for why it will soon abandon the nursing home along South Huntington Avenue that it built and moved into 85 years ago.

Diana Pisciotta, a spokeswoman for the trustees, said the board’s unpaid, volunteer members began exploring the facility’s future due to needed renovations. The work would have meant an estimated \$10 million in construction to expand small rooms, lavatories and hallways, upgrade the sprinkler system as required by federal law.

Along with the need to modernize, the board considered a recent drop in the rate of nursing home use nationally and that the number of empty nursing home beds in Massachusetts has risen and is expected to continue to rise despite declines in the total number of beds.

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All of that amounted to a determination by the board that trying to continue with Goddard would be an inefficient use of resources toward its mission of supporting Boston's elderly population, particularly those who have limited access to healthcare and other services, said Pisciotta. Instead, the board plans to invest in other options that help fulfill unmet needs of local seniors.

"If we thought this building was critical to the health industry we are in, we would have made the investment to upgrade our infrastructure," she said. "The reason we made this decision was not because we weren't filling our beds. We've always been a popular choice."

Still, staff and patients contend the building serves an important need and is in more than adequate condition to carry on.

Goddard received a perfect score on the state health department's performance survey each of the past three years and has a five-star quality rating from the federal agency that administers Medicare and Medicaid.

"I think it's good when nursing homes close due to substandard care, but this is just nonsensical," said Julie Miller, a nurse practitioner from Boston Medical Center's geriatric division who works at Goddard.

"It's truly one of the excellent institutions," she added. "The building's not fancy, but it works. I've been in other facilities that are much older and in much worse repair."

Merlin Southwick heads Mount Pleasant Home, a facility next door to Goddard that provides residential care for seniors, but not licensed skilled nursing care.

Since 2000, Mount Pleasant has referred about 30 of its residents to Goddard, he said. "It's our primary backup for when residents need more service."

He said he is disappointed and puzzled by the planned shutdown.

Last year, Mount Pleasant modernized and expanded its building, which is a year older than Goddard, though about one-third its size. The project increased resident capacity from 44 to 66. No residents were relocated during the 18 months of work, he said. The \$20 million project was paid for, largely through fundraising, by a nonprofit that had about \$3 million in unrestricted assets at

the end of 2010.

Meanwhile, Goddard had about \$21.5 million in unrestricted assets at the end of the same year, according to its most recent available federal tax filing.

The organization runs another facility in Brookline – also called Goddard House – which provides assisted living care, but not licensed skilled nursing care. That center will remain open.

Madeleine Biondolillo, state health department director of health care safety and quality, said in a statement that her staff has cleared, but is continuing to monitor, the Jamaica Plain center's shutdown.

“While the closure of Goddard House reduces capacity for skilled nursing care in Jamaica Plain, the closure plan is well reasoned and considerate of any concerns regarding patients and staff in light of their decision to close,” her statement said.

Mary Smith, one of Goddard's former Mount Pleasant residents, turns 98 this month. Her niece and caretaker Diane Daren is helping to relocate her.

“I'm suspicious about how fast this is all happening and what they're going to do with that building,” Daren said.

Trustee member Emily Brower said the board has “explicitly” avoided discussing the two-acre property's future and that the board will not start talking about it until after the closure. Pisciotta said that proceeds from a potential sale of the building would go back to the nonprofit, which invests all of its funding toward its mission.

The valuable real estate is surrounded by recently completed and proposed developments, including plans that, pending city approval, would build 400 new residential units altogether across two other South Huntington Avenue properties – one abuts the Goddard building; the other is several hundred feet away.

Rev. Gerald Bell, pastor of Strong Tower Church in Boston, is also wary. His 76-year-old mother will likely relocate from Goddard to a facility Indiana near other family.

"I don't believe they had to move everyone out in a 60-day period, and I don't believe that they had no other option than to close," he said.

The board's spokeswoman said that by the end of this week about 85 patients will have moved out, leaving about 30 at Goddard.

"Once residents are aware that a facility is closing, it is common that patients and families want to move quickly to find a new placement on their own," Pisciotta said.

She said the speed the replacement process has taken so far shows how other nearby skilled nursing care providers can take on new patients. She described the transition process so far as moving at a "natural" and "organic" pace.

But, Miller said the atmosphere has been rushed, "crazy."

"If Angell Animal Medical Center [a veterinarian hospital across from Goddard] closed and all of the animals had to be relocated in 60 days, people would be outraged and picketing outside," she said. "But, when it involves the elderly, I feel like there's not enough attention paid."

"People are really dejected," she added. "They feel lied to and used."

Among them is Lillian McLean, 85, who was scheduled to be relocated to another nursing home this week.

"I'm very upset, and mad, too," she said by phone from Goddard, where she has lived for the past three years. "Everybody likes it here, it's like home to us."

*A prior version of this story said the Goddard House facility in Jamaica Plain profited about \$1 million per year between 2008 and 2010 and that the organization's Brookline facility generated a slightly higher profit between that span. Those figures, based on tax record documents, only accounted for programming revenue and expenses and do not accurately account for expenses related to administrative and general expenses. The total revenue and expenses for the respective facilities is not detailed in the tax records, but the Goddard organization averaged annual profit of \$1 million between 2008 and 2010.*

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