



# Equip for Equality

Advancing the Human & Civil Rights of People with Disabilities in Illinois

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## **Equip for Equality Calls on Governor to Pledge Full Funding To Ensure Quality Services for People with Disabilities Following Closure of the Howe Developmental Center and the Tinley Park Mental Health Hospital**

CHICAGO – Repeated calls by Equip for Equality and other advocacy groups for the closure of the beleaguered Howe Developmental Center (Tinley Park) were finally answered today with the State’s announcement that Howe will be closing its doors.

“We commend the Governor for making a very difficult but absolutely the right decision for the residents as well as Illinois taxpayers,” said Zena Naiditch, President and CEO of a federally mandated watchdog and advocacy group, Equip for Equality.

“Today, we call on the Governor to stand with the resident and families of Howe by pledging that 100% of the state funding going to Howe today will follow these residents as they move to their future homes. It is absolutely critical for each resident to be offered a high quality community-based living option among their choices. And, finally, any savings resulting from the closure of Howe should be promised to other individuals with developmental disabilities and their families, who are waiting for community services,” said Naiditch.

“I want the residents and families of Howe to know that Equip for Equality will stand with you during this challenging time of change and transition, to ensure that you are provided with high quality choices. We will advocate for residents who are not provided with quality, individualized community-based supports and services as one of their choices, so they can finally enjoy a stable, safe and promising future. In the coming weeks, we will work collaboratively with the Department of Human Services to ensure that resident and families get timely and regular communication, resources and supports, as they move through the transition process,” said Naiditch.

“It is my hope that the residents and their families, the State and Equip for Equality will move forward together in a constructive, collaborative manner. The focus should be on residents and their families and supporting them, giving them the resources they need to make the best decisions they can for their future. Lost jobs and the economic implications

of Howe's closure are also important and also need to be considered by policymakers, but they should not overshadow the State in keeping its promise to the residents and families of Howe," said Naiditch.

As the federally mandated, independent watchdog for people with disabilities for the State of Illinois, two years ago Equip for Equality's Abuse Investigation Unit, which has an interdisciplinary team with clinicians and investigatory expertise, launched its own in-depth examination into the conditions at Howe. More than 1,500 hours of staff time were dedicated to this undertaking: frequent unannounced site visits were made (continuing to this day), numerous interviews were held with residents and staff, and hundreds of facility records were reviewed, including numerous individual files and 24 recent resident deaths.

Findings of the independent investigation by Equip for Equality's Abuse Investigation Unit were shared with the State and resulted in Equip for Equality's calls for closure beginning in early 2007 and the initiation of an investigation by the United States Department of Justice, which is ongoing. Equip for Equality has also called for the closure of the Choate Developmental Center in downstate Anna, Illinois. The U.S. Justice Department also has an ongoing investigation at this institution.

"Conditions at Howe are unique among the eight state developmental institutions in several ways: the length of time Howe remained Medicaid decertified, the extraordinary new costs the State expended in an effort to fix the institution, and the alarming number of resident deaths. At the same time, it needs to be recognized that the nature of the problems at Howe are documented time and time again in other state-run institutions in Illinois and across the country. These are the same problems which Equip for Equality documented at the Lincoln Developmental Center and led then Governor Ryan to close that institution in 2002," said Deborah Kennedy, Director of the Abuse Investigation Unit.

"We also call on the Governor to pledge that as a part of the closure of the decertified Tinley Park Mental Health Hospital, that a plan be developed which includes adequate funding to ensure that sufficient level of acute care mental health services are readily available in the Tinley Park catchment area to meet the needs of individuals with mental illness, and that if any savings are realized through the closure, those savings be maintained in Illinois' mental health system," said Naiditch.

The mission of Equip for Equality is to advance the human and civil rights of people with disabilities in Illinois. Established in 1985, it has served as the Governor-designated, federally mandated state Protection & Advocacy System for over twenty-two years. Its programs and services include self-advocacy assistance, legal services, a Training Institute on Disability Rights, a public policy program and the Abuse Investigation Unit.