Conklin Center Daytona Beach News Journal article 3-2-2020

Conklin Center closing

State finds contract violations, cuts off funding for Daytona facility that helps the blind

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DAYTONA BEACH - The Conklin Center for the Blind, a nonprofit serving Floridians with multiple disabilities including blindness for more than 40 years, will close Friday after state officials found numerous violations of a contract.

More than 50 clients - who have relied on the agency to assist them with paying bills on time, getting to and from doctor's visits and finding housing - will be losing their services, said staff members who asked not to be identified. Some residential clients have been moved to the Division of Blind Services, a state agency with offices across White Street from the Conklin Center, while others have been sent home.

Conklin attracted clients from all over Florida and beyond because of its rare mission of working with people who are blind and have at least one other disability. The closing will cost about 40 people their jobs.

"To say that closing this facility is a tragedy is an understatement," CEO Kelly Harris said in a Conklin Center news release. "This news has been traumatic for our students-in-residence, our graduates and, of course, our very dedicated staff."

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Funding from the Division of Blind Services, $1.6 million, represents about 60% of the Conklin Center's budget, the Conklin release states.

The Division of Blind Services spelled out those problems in a Feb. 18 letter to Harris and the agency's board.

"The Conklin Center continues to operate in a state of material breach and non-compliance with its contractual requirements, has altered client service documentation and environmental conditions may cause undue harm or danger to the vulnerable clients who are residents of the Conklin Center," the letter, signed by Robert Doyle, director of blind services, states.

Among the Division of Blind Services' findings: . Conklin Center staff failed to notify the state's review team of the existence of a basement and of its recent discontinued use. The review team later learned that basement had flooded and its condition "presents health and safety concerns" related to mold.

. Division of Blind Services staff found discrepancies and conflicting documentation in clients' medical records, raising "additional health and safety concerns."

. "As late as Feb. 3, 2020, the Conklin Center had been altering client records in the DBS AWARE client database for services received in December 2019," the letter states.

. The Conklin Center, under the contract, was obligated to provide services to 14 qualified, residential clients and had only 9 at the time of Division of Blind Services monitoring.

. Additionally, the Conklin Center was operating without a required credentialed professionals, including a certified vision rehabilitation therapist. The center operated without an orientation and mobility specialist from October to Dec. 26, 2019, "although the president/CEO claimed there was an O&M consultant onsite during these months."

Harris, in the prepared statement, called the state's suggestion on Feb. 5 that compliance could be achieved in two weeks "just not reasonable."

"While many of the issues had already been resolved, some are too complex to have been remedied within that short time frame - especially under penalty of closure," Harris said.

The Conklin Center for the Blind has since 1978 operated a Daytona Beach facility whose mission has been to help people with multiple disabilities including