



By **Mark J. Magyar**, July 26, 2012 in **More Issues**

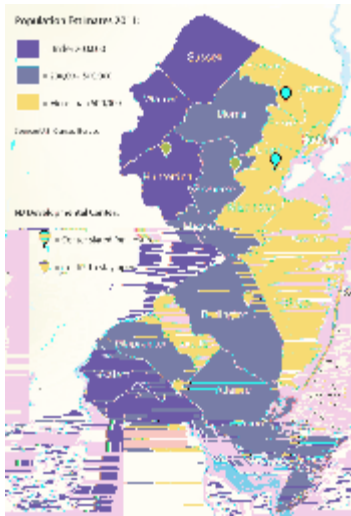
On paper, it was a no-brainer. The Vineland Developmental Center should be the next large institution closed as part of New Jersey's strategy to move to community-based care for the developmentally disabled, state Human Resources Commissioner Jennifer Velez and her staff had decided.

Of the state's seven developmental centers, Vineland had the highest percentage of residents who wanted to move to group homes and other community programs, Velez told Senate and Assembly committees in May 2011. In fact, 68 percent of Vineland's 350 residents were ambulatory, and Vineland already had placements for 40 residents in group homes on site.

so shocked on Monday when the Task Force on the Closure of State Developmental Centers announced that Vineland, Totowa and Woodbridge, the only two developmental centers in the populous northern part of the state, where most of the state's population lives, should close -- and that Vineland should be the first to go.

"I am surprised that Vineland is being kept open," Lozano said. "I know that there is a lot of controversy about the economic impact of the closing on the Vineland area. There are a lot of people who live in the smaller campus at Vineland, and were making provisions for residents to move to other facilities. I remember a young lady Saturday who told me she was moving into a group home."

"From a philosophical point of view, it's troubling that decisions about which institutions to close are being made for economic reasons. You don't keep facilities open just to protect jobs."



“In the case of Vineland, Cumberland County and South Jersey, these jobs represent jobs that are higher than the per capita income in the area,” Van Drew said in an interview yesterday. “In other communities, it’s hard to get people to fill these jobs. Closing Vineland would have had a profoundly negative

[Click to enlarge.](#)

making its decision: (1) the number of residents in each facility ready to move into community placements; (2) the capacity of the surrounding community to provide the necessary services and support; (3) the operational needs of the Department of Human Services to accomplish the transition; (4) the economic impact on the community in which the developmental center is located if the center was to close; and (5) the projected repair and maintenance costs of each center.

The economic impact factor would clearly work in favor of Vineland because Cumberland County's 13.5 percent unemployment rate is the highest in the state.

The requirement that the task force consider the capacity of the surrounding community to provide the necessary group homes and services was a somewhat questionable criteria because residents of the state's institutions generally are drawn from all over the state and usually are moved into group homes in their home counties to be nearer to family, Lozano pointed out.

Notably missing from the list of criteria was the demographic issue of accessibility to institutionalized care for various regions and population centers that Velez had considered in selecting Vineland as the next institution to close.

"The state laid out the five factors we had to consider," said Nancy Thaler, a former Pennsylvania state developmental disabilities official and current executive director of the National Association of State Directors of Disabilities Services, who was one of Christie's three appointee to the panel.

Thaler, a Pennsylvania resident, was the only one of the five task force members with a developmentally disabled child.

Christie's choice for chairman was Craig Domalewski, a Morris County lawyer who had served as a senior counsel in the Christie administration throughout 2010 and 2011 before moving back to private practice with Dughi, Hewitt and Domalewski, the firm where Christie had worked before becoming U.S. Attorney in 2001.

Christie also appointed Colin M. Newman, a current member of his Governor's Counsel's Office, to the task force.

Sweeney's choice was Van Drew's chief of staff, Allison Murphy, who could not be expected to be fully objective in her evaluation of Vineland's value compared to other facilities. Oliver, who is the North Jersey half of the North Jersey/South Jersey power-sharing arrangement in the New Jersey Legislature engineered by Norcross, Sweeney and DiVincenzo, made an even more surprising choice when she chose Valessa Rocke Goehringer, a staff psychologist at the Vineland Developmental Center.

Asked whether the inclusion of both Murphy and Goehringer gave Vineland Developmental Center undue influence on a five-member commission that was supposed to consider the needs of the state as a whole,

The two closures would reduce New Jersey's developmental center census to approximately 1,700 by 2017 -- not far from the goal of 1,500 by July 12 set in the original 2007 "Path to Progress" goals.

Ironically, the plan would cut 2,600 jobs from the Totowa and Woodbridge institutions -- twice the 1,300 that would have been lost from Vineland if the original plan had gone through in June 2011, although the Department of Human Services would most likely have targeted a second developmental center for closure before 2015 in order to meet its goal.

The plan was approved by the task force 4-0 on Monday, with Christie's former counsel, Christie's current counsel, Van Drew's chief of staff, and Thaler providing the yes votes. Goehringer, the Vineland

