

DAILY COMMERCIAL

Troubled National Deaf Academy closes

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MOUNT DORA -- The National Deaf Academy in Mount Dora has closed, according to the Agency for Health Care Administration.

The psychiatric treatment facility for those with special needs has been the focus of several investigations over the years, including by the Federal Bureau of Investigation, Florida Department of Children and Families and the Florida Agency For Health Care Administration (AHCA), for allegations of child abuse and neglect.

Three civil lawsuits have also been filed against the facility, alleging negligence and the abuse of children at the facility.

The allegations of abuse and neglect involve one child being punched and thrown to the ground, another being doped and a third child getting scabies, according to Bruce Maxwell, the attorney representing the families in those cases.

In total, there have been 10 other lawsuits filed over the years, including two small-claims suits and a wrongful death suit, which was settled.

Maxwell said his clients are pleased the facility closed.

“When I first got involved in this, I had mentioned one of our goals was to shut down the facility or markedly improve it,” he said Friday.

Maxwell said the three cases he has filed are proceeding forward, and he expects to file at least three more in the coming months.

Steven Smith, NDA's director of business development, said in a statement that after careful consideration, the NDA Behavioral Health System has decided to refocus operations and modify its clinical services programs.

"As a result, we will no longer provide clinical programs and services for deaf and autistic individuals," he said.

NDA has programs designed for patients that are hard of hearing and who are autistic or deaf, according to the facility's website.

The 132-bed facility also has a preparatory school on campus, which offers education programs "focusing on deaf education and special needs programming to serve children, adolescents and young adults with psychiatric needs," according to its website.

Thirty-four patients remain at the facility, according to Smith.

Smith said the facility would be working with "residents, families and stakeholders to ensure a smooth discharge and safe transition to an appropriate level of care for those patients."

Further, Smith said the facility would develop new treatment programs in the future but would not elaborate on what those programs were.

AHCA has investigated the agency numerous times. According to one of its reports, a patient suffered a fractured elbow after being pushed by a mental health technician there in 2014. Some patients tried to commit suicide, one left the facility and was hit by a car and, in other cases, staff issued "orders for the use of restraint or seclusion" for patients.

In 2008, staff did a forceful takedown of a misbehaving student whose leg was injured and later had to be amputated, according to a lawsuit filed in circuit court.

DCF has investigated the NDA 111 times for allegations of child abuse between Jan. 1, 2004, and July 31, 2014, according to the agency.

Of those 111 incidents, officials said there was evidence of abuse in 15, according to DCF documents.