



**BAY AREA REGIONAL OFFICE**  
1330 Broadway, Suite 500  
Oakland, CA 94612  
Tel: (510) 267-1200  
TTY: (800) 719-5798  
Toll Free: (800) 776-5746  
Fax: (510) 267-1201  
[www.disabilityrightsca.org](http://www.disabilityrightsca.org)

*California's protection and advocacy system*

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**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

Contact: Leslie Morrison  
Director, Investigations Unit  
510-267-1200  
[Leslie.Morrison@disabilityrightsca.org](mailto:Leslie.Morrison@disabilityrightsca.org)

**Disability Rights California dismayed by report of pervasive, systemic problems at Sonoma Developmental Center; urges prompt implementation of plan of correction and additional oversight**

OAKLAND, Calif., Aug. 24 – On July 3, the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services completed its annual review of the Sonoma Developmental Center, which houses 531 people with developmental disabilities. The 250 page report, entitled "A Statement of Deficiency," describes pervasive and systemic problems that touch essentially all areas of resident care and protection.

Disability Rights California recently received a copy of the report, under its authority to investigate abuse and neglect. In response, we are issuing the following statement that includes our recommendations for changing practices and, ultimately, the culture which have led to unacceptable substandard resident care.

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Disability Rights California is dismayed by the findings in the recent Center for Medicare and Medicaid Services survey of Sonoma Developmental Center. We find the report reflects a culture of disregard for the dignity, health, safety and rights of the individuals they serve.

Sadly, the survey report reflects a lack of basic inquiry, accountability and commitment to ensuring the ongoing safety, care and treatment of the

residents. Staff disregarded existing policies and procedures in many of these areas – policies that, if followed, would have prevented or promptly addressed many problems identified. Unfortunately, it appears that many facility staff have become accustomed to substandard resident care and treatment, such that incidents of resident abuse and neglect are no longer alarming or even recognized.

The Department of Developmental Services (Department) has outlined an aggressive and comprehensive plan of correction. Disability Rights California applauds some of the corrective actions outlined, many of which are consistent with prior Disability Rights California recommendations. They include:

- addressing lapses in recognizing indications of abuse and neglect and ensuring staff satisfy their legal duty to report it promptly
- honing/augmenting the existing incident reporting system to collect and provide more details of events surrounding the incident, improve thoroughness and focus/purpose of clinical management and administration reviews of incidents, identify patterns and trends and focus corrective action
- enhancing the training of program management and Office of Protective Services in conducting prompt and thorough investigations and taking immediate action to safeguard residents
- ensuring sufficient numbers and mix of qualified staff to meet resident medical, nursing, habilitation and behavioral needs
- partnering with regional centers to identify family members and others who can provide informed consent when a resident lacks capacity

While the Department's plan is a good first step, meaningful change will occur only if the Department changes the culture at Sonoma Developmental Center and holds managers and supervisors accountable for correcting the abuse. Disability Rights California is committed to working with the Department and will be monitoring Sonoma Developmental Center to ensure that real and meaningful change has occurred.

Similarly, Disability Rights California urges every entity with an interest in the care and treatment of Sonoma Developmental Center residents, including regional centers, the District Attorney's Office, and the Department of Justice, to immediately commit to guaranteeing resident

safety and the return of resident dignity and active treatment. We also encourage the Department to work closely with regional centers, as well as with clients placed at Sonoma Developmental Center, to review the appropriateness of the placement in light of the survey report and to determine, as required by recent changes in law, what services the client needs to live in the community.

A critical piece of reform is ensuring that outside law enforcement take an active role in investigating crimes against residents, and that prosecutors aggressively pursue cases of abuse of residents by staff. It is no longer acceptable for local law enforcement to ignore that the largest clustering of vulnerable dependent adults in their county resides at Sonoma Developmental Center, and to rely on internal Office of Protective Services investigators to conduct thorough and independent criminal investigation sufficient to sustain prosecution. It is no longer acceptable for the District Attorney to decline to prosecute or to accept minimal plea agreements in cases of serial abuse and repeated, blatant predatory behavior. State and federal oversight must be heightened to ensure corrective action is sustained and that conditions never again deteriorate to this level that harkens back to institutional living of decades ago.

We, at Disability Rights California, renew our commitment to ensure that the residents at Sonoma Developmental Center and all institutions are treated with dignity and respect, are free from abuse and neglect at the hands of caregivers, and receive quality care and treatment to develop skills to live successfully in the community of their choice.