

Capitol at impasse on plans to move retarded

By Sam Newlund
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Battle lines hardened Wednesday in the Minnesota Legislature over a proposal to move nearly all 1,300 retarded people out of state hospitals and into small group homes in the next six years.

The House Health and Human Services Committee approved a bill agreeing substantially with the plan by the Department of Human Services to leave only a handful of retarded people in the hospitals by mid-1995.

But in a Senate committee, Sen. Don Samuelson, DFL-Brainerd, argued for his rival bill, which would slow the process and leave more people in the state hospitals, now called regional treatment centers.

A hoped-for compromise fell apart last weekend.

Samuelson and Rep. Paul Ogren, DFL-Aitkin, broke off compromise talks when they couldn't agree on the



number of state-operated group homes that should be in place by 1993. Ogren is author of the department bill that emerged from several months' negotiations among interest groups on the department's plan to reshape the hospital system.

With deadlines for committee action approaching, the odds are great that the issue will be settled in a conference committee near the end of the session. "I'm a little dismayed to say it, but I think that's where we're likely to go," Ogren said.

The House Health and Human Services Committee defeated two critical amendments before approving the department bill on a voice vote. One, by Rep. Kris Hasskamp, DFL-Crosby, would have deleted the num-

ber of people to be moved and directed the department to come back with another plan.

Another, by Rep. Steven Sviggum, IR-Kenyon, lost on a 12-12 tie vote. It would have given employees of private group homes a 3.5 percent pay increase to help reduce the difference between their pay and the pay of state employees. Sviggum said it would cost \$2.9 million the next two years.

Ogren said the amendment would make budget-cutting problems much worse. Rep. Lee Greenfield, chairman of the Human Services Division of House Appropriations, said: "I know of no way we're going to come up with \$2.9 million."

Lobbyists for private operators of residences and activity centers for the retarded have pushed hard for pay equity. They argue that state payment rates produce an unfair disadvantage that will drive away skilled private employees and produce inferior care. The Department of Human Services and many legislators have

said, in effect: Yes, it's a problem, but we can't fix it now.

The House committee adopted an amendment by Ogren for moderate increases in the number of retarded people to be left in regional centers. Four-bed crisis units would be established at six centers, in Cambridge, Faribault, Fergus Falls, Moose Lake, St. Peter and Willmar. In addition, two 15-bed units would remain at Willmar.

In the Senate, Samuelson's bill specifies no dwindling numbers of retarded people to be left in the regional centers at certain points the next few years, as the House bill does. He and other opponents of the department's plan object to a quota-based plan for moving people out, arguing that individual needs and high-quality care in the community should come first.

He substituted his bill yesterday for an earlier version drafted by representatives of the hospital communi-

ties. But spokesmen for the communities spoke in favor of the new version.

It places a greater burden on the department to prove the desirability of moving each regional center resident slated for transfer.

It requires the state-operated system to be regional in character, including the 105 group homes and 44 day-program centers the state proposes to operate. The state hospitals would be headquarters for each region.

Under Samuelson's bill, large community-based homes for the retarded would have to pare down along with the regional centers.

By the year 2000, intermediate facilities could have no more than 16 beds. No regional center resident could be moved to a place with more than 15 beds. By mid-1993 that limit would drop to 10 beds.