

Kelso, board square off over nursing home money (11.1.06)

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Kelso, board square off over nursing home money
Executive calls panel's plan 'incompetent'

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Brown County has a plan to add beds at the county's nursing home, but the dollars behind the plan are hotly debated.

A committee of the Brown County Board recommended Monday funding 67 beds at the county nursing home through next year. That plan rejects a goal by County Executive Carol Kelso to downsize the nursing home to 40 beds in exchange for special one-time payments from the state.

The nursing home currently has 56 patient-residents.

"We don't feel as though we can get down to 40. There's no place for them to go," Supervisor Joe Van Duerzen, a member of the Human Services Committee, said Tuesday. "We can't just put these people out, so we're going to take care of them."

Running a nursing home with 67 patients would increase expenses by almost \$1 million more than Kelso's plan. The committee attempted to add new revenues to the budget to offset the rising cost. But some of those revenues are only projections, such as \$133,389 if the nursing home gets certified to take Medicare payments within six months.

Kelso had envisioned reducing beds next year while receiving special state payments of up to \$1.8 million. Her administration has already banked on some of those payments. The money is offered by the Wisconsin Department of Health and Family Services as incentive to move people out of public nursing homes and into private or community-based homes.

In an interview Tuesday, Kelso blasted supervisors who voted to keep the nursing home running with more beds. She scoffed at the committee's attempt to add revenue to the budget.

She said, the committee has not considered all the costs. For example, the committee added \$400,000 in additional revenue for increased patients in the psychiatric unit, but didn't add staff to that unit.

"It's just fiscally incompetent," Kelso said. "I cannot, in good conscience, condone phony budgeting."

The home serves people with serious behavioral and medical problems who sometimes don't fit in private nursing homes. Most of them are Medicaid patients.

Several community members pleaded with supervisors to keep the nursing home running. One of them, the Rev. Karen Helgerson, represented a social justice group called JOSHUA. Helgerson is the chaplain at the Brown County jail.

"There is a population in Brown County who require long-term care," Helgerson said. "If we don't deal with this at the mental health center, we will be forced to deal with them in our jails and homeless shelters."

Two representatives of local nursing homes spoke. One of them, Lonna Schmidt from Parkview Manor, said the home was interested in developing a program to take patients from Brown County.

"We feel that there definitely does need to be a safety-net facility," said Donna Zunker, administrator at GranCare Nursing Home. "But I certainly would not look at more than a 50-bed facility."

In other business, the committee recommended restoring about \$52,000 for a welfare fraud investigator that Kelso had proposed to cut. The investigators themselves pleaded for that change and said the county was failing the public on ensuring against welfare fraud.