



'Oppressive heat' at secure center for people with disabilities

Officials with the Office for People With Developmental Disabilities did not respond to questions about the allegations at Sunmount facility in Tupper Lake

TUPPER LAKE — A secure, state-operated facility in the Adirondacks operated by the Office for People With Developmental Disabilities has not had working air conditioning for nearly three years, and staff members and residents are enduring "oppressive heat" conditions, according to a letter sent to the state director of operations by the head of the Public Employees Federation.

"This is not an emergency at this time, but it is a serious, ongoing priority that demands immediate attention," Wayne Spence, president of the union, wrote in his letter to Jackie Bray on Thursday. "I personally toured the facility (Wednesday) and experienced the oppressive heat that both staff and residents, who are a vulnerable population, face."

The union leader's letter was sent on a day that temperatures in New York were expected to hover around 100 degrees amid the hottest week of the year so far. Many of the individuals housed at the Sunmount Developmental Center in Franklin County are at the secure facility because they are prone to violent outbursts due to conditions such as autism and other neurodevelopmental disabilities. The medications they take also can make them more at risk for adverse reactions to high heat.

Jennifer O'Sullivan, a spokeswoman for the Office for People With Developmental Disabilities, said their agency "has been working to fix issues where central air conditioning is failing or is not feasible on the Sunmount campus due to aging infrastructure."

"Programming in the affected areas has been adjusted to take place in cooler spaces during this heat wave and interim portable units are being installed as we work to resolve this issue," she added.

There are 145 people receiving services at the secure facility and more than 1,100 employees.

Spence, who heads the state's second-largest public-sector labor union, said he learned during a visit to the facility this week that the air-conditioning system had been inoperable for nearly three years.

"These are some of New York's most vulnerable individuals — people with developmental disabilities who depend on the state to provide safe, humane, and dignified living

conditions," he wrote in his letter to Bray. "It is unacceptable that a critical infrastructure issue affecting the health, comfort, and quality of life of these residents has remained unresolved for so long."

Dr. Ilana Slaff-Galatan, a certified psychiatrist who completed a fellowship on autism with the American Psychiatric Association, said that the individuals who are being treated at the secure, 200-bed facility in Tupper Lake have health conditions and take medications that increase the likelihood of an adverse reaction to high temperatures.

"There are a number of factors that are involved here: No. 1 is that when temperatures are higher, people are more violent and (it may be) more intensive violence as well, and that puts a risk to individuals harming each other and harming the staff," Slaff-Galatan said. "Sunmount treats people with developmental disabilities; people with intellectual disability and autism have a very high risk for seizures and also subclinical seizures. ... Heat increases the risk of seizures, so there's health risks on that end as well."

She said the psychiatric medications provided to many of the residents there also may alter the body's thermal regulation and increase body temperature, but decrease their reaction to that increase and prevent them from hydrating or trying to keep cool.

"For example, lithium, if you're dehydrated, it can destroy your kidneys and end your life," Slaff-Galatan said. "Lithium has ... what we call in psychiatry a therapeutic-to-toxic ratio, so lithium could be therapeutic at one dose and one level, and even a slightly higher level could be toxic and can kill you."

In his letter to Bray about the broken air conditioning, Spence urged her to explain "why this problem has persisted for years, what steps have been taken to address it, and, most importantly, when residents and staff can expect a permanent solution."

"Our most vulnerable citizens deserve better," he added. "They should not have to endure another summer without a functioning air-conditioning system because of bureaucratic delays or a lack of urgency."