

Ancora makes gains in reform

Officials: More improvement needed

By JEAN MIKLE
New Jersey Press Media

WINSLOW — In the last decade, death came too easily for some patients inside Ancora Psychiatric Hospital.

Marie Marcucci, 58, choked to death after she took a candy bar she was not supposed to have.

DeWitt Crandell Jr., 35, hanged himself with a bed sheet in a bathroom after slipping away from two orderlies. Jerry Postel, 44, was dead for hours before staff members found him, even though his chart had called for orderlies to check on him every 15 minutes.

These deaths from 2007 and 2008 are just three of the tragic incidents that prompted a U.S. Justice Department investigation of Ancora, the state's largest

See ANCORA, Page 6A



Michelle Franchetti, 52, of Hammonton and Marvin Giordano, 21, of Point Pleasant walk through a hall at Ancora Psychiatric Hospital. THOMAS P. COSTELLO/NEW JERSEY PRESS MEDIA

ANCORA ADAPTS
» Hospital offers programs to help patients. Page 6A

Ancora

Continued from Page 1A

facility for the mentally ill, based in Winslow.

New Jersey Press Media investigations in 2007, 2008 and 2009 revealed a dysfunctional and often violent hospital where staff members were caught sleeping on the job, wrong medications were sometimes given to patients, and illegal drugs had been smuggled inside.

In 2008, there were 1,911 physical contacts involving patients or staff members, with 61 considered serious enough to require medical attention. Six patients died unexpectedly in 20 months before the Justice Department began investigating conditions at Ancora in September 2008.

In a scathing 2009 report, the Justice Department branded the hospital as a place where patients were subject to "serious, frequent and recurrent harm."

Today, mental health advocates and Ancora staff paint a different picture of the hospital. Violent incidents have been reduced, the staff is better trained, and patients are receiving improved treatment, they say. Reducing the hospital's patient population has helped the remaining patients receive better quality care, according to hospital staff.

Serious injuries from patient to patient, or patient to staff attacks, were at 50 last year, down from the 61 in 2008. There were 2 unexpected deaths in 2011, down from four in 2007.

On a cold, quiet day in late January, Ancora looked more like a 1950s-era high school than a place the Justice Department labeled as dangerous to patients. The smell of cooking cafeteria food wafted through the buildings while patients walked to lunch after morning therapy sessions had ended.

The hallways in Ancora's Maple Hall were quiet; a music therapy session had just finished. The concrete block walls were decorated with pictures created by patients during art therapy sessions. A table held small decorated patient-made sculptures to be placed in a courtyard garden where wind chimes dangled and water bubbled in a small koi pond.

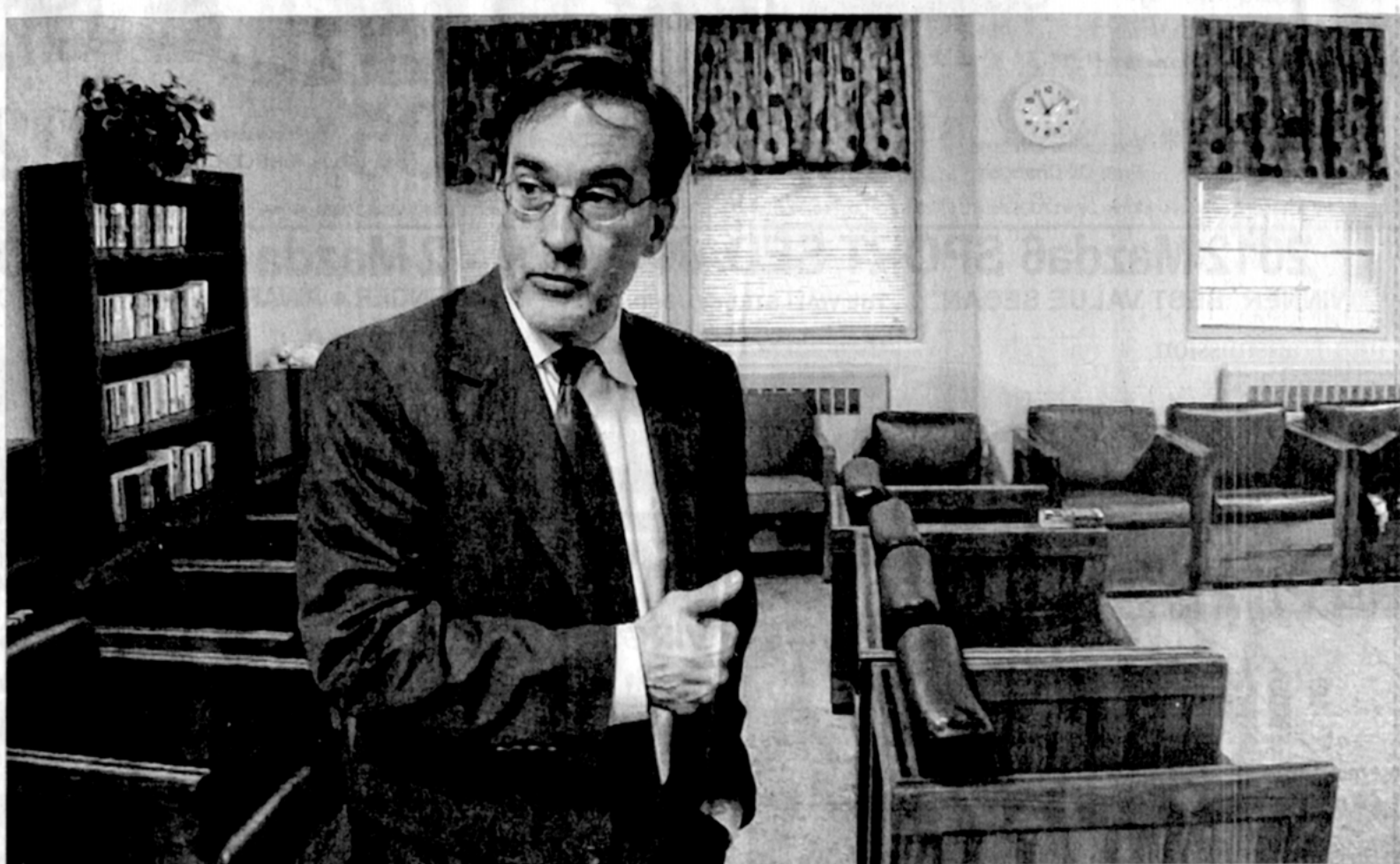
"The hospital has come a long way in the past couple of years," said Phil Lubitz, director of advocacy programs for the National Alliance on Mental Illness New Jersey. However, "there are some concerns about the census (patient count) starting to creep up a little bit."

When Marlboro Psychiatric Hospital in Monmouth County closed in 1998, the number of patients at Ancora skyrocketed. Before Marlboro shut its doors, Ancora averaged about 550 patients; from 2002 to 2008, more than 700 patients were housed at Ancora, even though its capacity is 600.

The hospital now has fewer than 500 patients.

Chief Executive Officer Allan E. Boyer, who came to Ancora in October 2008, said hospital officials have worked to lower the number of patients and improve safety, as well as provide better treatment to those who remain.

"We have continued to bring the census down," Boyer said. "We've reduced our violence; we've reduced our number of as-



Chief Executive Officer Allan E. Boyer tours one of the buildings at Ancora Psychiatric Hospital in Winslow. A decline in patients has helped make the hospital safer. PHOTOS BY THOMAS P. COSTELLO/NEW JERSEY PRESS MEDIA



A decorated courtyard is one of the features offered to help patients with their treatment at Ancora Psychiatric Hospital's Maple Hall in Winslow.

saults."

Boyer said the hospital quickly moves to discharge patients who no longer require the intense supervision Ancora provides. Most patients in Ancora are placed there by the courts because they are considered a threat to harm themselves or others.

Ancora provides services for patients from Ocean, Atlantic, Camden, Cape May, Cumberland, Gloucester and Salem counties. Burlington County patients had been diverted to Trenton Psychiatric Hospital for the past several years to ease some of the overcrowding at Ancora. But, they began returning to Ancora in October.

The number of patients has dropped to 498 as of Feb. 27, a decrease of about 36 percent from all-time high of 782 in October 2006.

Of the 498 patients at Ancora, 202 have been cleared for discharge by the courts but have been unable to leave the hospital because they have nowhere to go, according to Ellen Lovejoy, a spokeswoman for the state Department of Human Services.

'Treatment malls'

Point Pleasant resident Marvin Giordano, 21 was upbeat about his stay at Ancora, which he said had helped him learn to live with his bipolar disorder.

Sitting in a patient library and reading room at

Ancora's Maple Hall, Giordano said before he came to the hospital he had difficulty controlling his sometimes impulsive behavior.

"The medication has really helped me, as well as the programs," said Giordano, who hopes to return to college to study liberal arts.

Like other patients, Giordano participated in programming presented in "treatment malls," shifting from group to group the same way students change classes in a high school.

Programming for patients is offered from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. Monday through Friday, and groups address issues like medication education, health education, symptom management and illness management and recovery.

Patients follow a schedule made in consultation with their treatment team. In addition to programs like symptom management, illness management and recovery and discharge preparation, it can include art and music therapy.

While at Ancora, patients can also study for their high school diploma or participate in vocational classes to help prepare them for work. Those under 22 can earn a high school diploma while at Ancora, which conducts its own graduation ceremony every June.

In the past, some hospital patients were critical of Ancora's programming,

saying patients frequently spent hours each day watching television or films and not engaging in activities that could help address their illnesses. Patients often received only three to five hours a week of active treatment. That number has increased to about 20 hours a week for almost all patients, state officials say.

State Assembly Majority Leader Louis D. Greenwald, D-Camden, said his office doesn't receive as many complaints about the hospital as it did several years ago.

"We're not hearing the complaints, we're not getting it from the community, from the mayor," Greenwald said. "All that being said, it's still very fragile."

Greenwald said there is still need for more supportive housing for mentally ill people after they are discharged.

Lubitz agreed, saying that advocates remain concerned that some Ancora patients are being released to inappropriate settings, including boarding homes. Those patients do not get the help they need to prevent them from relapsing and returning to Ancora, he said.

Population may rise

Ancora could face new challenges in the coming months. Ninety-five miles north in Hunterdon County, the state plans to close the Hagedorn Psychiatric Hos-

pital in June. That could mean more patients will be sent to Ancora.

"With the closing of Hagedorn, there is concern it could start to bubble over again," Greenwald said. "That's why I say this is very fragile."

Many of Hagedorn's 113 patients are senior citizens, and some of those patients will likely be sent to Ancora's 57-bed geriatric wing.

So far, Ancora has received one patient from Hagedorn, according to Lovejoy, the Human Services spokeswoman.

"All the hospitals are slated to get more patients," Boyer said. "That's certainly going to be an additional challenge."

Reducing the number of patients, along with a series of reforms adopted by the Legislature, have helped improve conditions at Ancora, Greenwald said.

The reforms included a requirement the state report patient deaths and assaults at its five psychiatric hospitals, improve training for workers there, and require drug tests for new employees.

Mary Zdanowicz, whose sister, Beth, was a patient at Ancora from 1998 until 2008, said she worries that an increase in the number of patients could again make patients vulnerable to assaults.

Beth, diagnosed with schizophrenia during her first year of college, has been hospitalized for 20 years. In 2007, when Anco-

ra had more than 750 patients, Beth was assaulted numerous times by other patients. In one case she was thrown to the ground by her roommate, and required four sutures to close a 2-inch wound, according to patient records that Zdanowicz obtained from Ancora.

Beth was transferred to Hagedorn on May 21, 2008. Zdanowicz said she is hopeful that her sister will be sent to Greystone Park Psychiatric Hospital in Parsippany-Troy Hills, not Ancora.

CEO Boyer said hospital administrators remain committed to making Ancora a safer place. The administration is developing a strategic plan to lower violence levels.

The hospital used a similar approach in 2009 to cut the number of restraints used on patients at Birch Hall by 58 percent in six months.

A key to keeping Ancora's population low is ensuring discharged patients do not falter in the outside world.

Since 2008, the hospital has offered counseling and assistance for patients ready to leave Ancora.

About 33 patients a day attend the self-help center, which tries to provide them with the skills they will need when they leave the hospital, said Karen Burke, coordinator of hospital services for Collaborative Support Programs of New Jersey, the contractor who runs the self-help center for the state. Patients learn how to get along with others, how to find an apartment, and other life skills.

"Ancora is a lovely place, but you don't want to spend the rest of your life here," Burke said.

Psychiatric patients, many of whom have suffered from mental illness for years, often become alienated from family members and friends. Released from the hospital, they may become lonely and discouraged, a situation that can lead to relapses and readmission.

The self-help center aims to connect patients with support groups of former patients and other organizations that can assist the mentally ill.

Patient Giordano said he doesn't think he will have to return to Ancora.

"My goal is to get out and stay out," he said.

Changes help improve patients' lives

By JEAN MIKLE
New Jersey Press Media

WINSLOW — Hammon-ton resident Michelle Franchetti said her second stay in Ancora Psychiatric Hospital was more beneficial than the first time she was there, several years ago.

Franchetti, 52, said that her fourth-month stay in Ancora helped her learn more about her illness, and "how to maintain it better, this time around." She is hopeful she will be able to find a

Programs are offered to treat substance abuse

job when she is discharged. "I plan on getting a part-time job and I want to take some courses," Franchetti said, while sitting in the patient's library and reading room at Maple Hall that was organized by a retired librarian.

Franchetti said her medication and counseling with a psychiatrist had left her more positive about controlling her bipolar dis-

order this time than she had felt after a previous one-month stay in Ancora. "It is definitely better here," she said.

Chief Executive Officer Allan E. Boyer said the hospital has added increased programming for patients and also offers more treatment for substance abuse issues.

Many psychiatric patients are also battling ad-

dictions to alcohol or drugs that make dealing with their mental health issues even more difficult.

If patients are more involved in their treatment program, they are more likely to stick with it and work to improve their health, Boyer said.

Patients work out an individual treatment plan with the help of their psychiatrist and other mem-

bers of their treatment team, which usually includes a psychiatrist, a nurse, a nursing staff member, a social worker, a medical doctor, a dietitian, a psychologist and a member of the hospital's rehabilitation staff.

Rehabilitation Supervisor Jacqueline White said Ancora offers vocational education classes, including courses on how to write

a resume, interviewing skills, and how to get along with co-workers.

Some patients even work at Ancora, earning \$7.25 an hour performing tasks like putting together plastic knife, fork and spoon sets to be used in the hospital, or, running a beauty salon for other Ancora residents.

"It is very, very difficult for them to find jobs in the community," White said. "We try to give them the skills they need."