

Plan would replace Eastern State Hospital

Fayette facility would replace Eastern State

By Stephenie Steitzer

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FRANKFORT, Ky. -- Gov. Steve Beshear announced plans yesterday to build a \$129 million mental health facility at the University of Kentucky's Coldstream Research Campus on Newtown Pike.

The facility would replace the 184-year-old Eastern State Hospital on West Fourth Street in Lexington. Beshear said the hospital is the second-oldest mental health facility in the country.

"It's the most dismal, depressing place that you could ever imagine having to take your loved one to for treatment," said Kelly Gunning, executive director of the National Alliance on Mental Illness Lexington.

The Lexington-Fayette Urban County Government would issue bonds for construction, and the state would make lease payments to the local government until the bonds are paid off.

The benefit to the city-county government is that it removes an eyesore from its downtown, Beshear said.

UK and Bluegrass Community and Technical College also are involved in the deal.

Bluegrass plans to build a classroom building on the old hospital property, freeing up land at the school's current location on Cooper Drive for use by UK.

"The state will end up with a modern psychiatric facility, UK will get needed space on its campus and the community and technical college system eventually can build a consolidated Lexington campus," Beshear said.

The plans still must be approved by Lexington and the General Assembly. Construction would take two years, but officials do not know when it would start.

They also do not know how many beds or square feet of space the new facility would have.

"We envision a new Eastern State Hospital that would provide a new spectrum of services, including residential and outpatient treatment and a crisis stability unit for those who need crisis psychiatric care," Beshear said.

Rep. Jimmie Lee, D-Elizabethtown, chairman of the House budget subcommittee on human services, said the current facility was designed as a traditional mental health institution and is not equipped to provide outpatient care and other forms of modern mental health treatment.

"As I visited Eastern State Hospital over the years, I always left embarrassed and ashamed as a policymaker that we allowed these conditions to exist," he said.

Gunning said her 31-year-old son has a chronic, untreated mental illness and has been taken to the hospital twice over the years on a court order.

She said she actually pitched in to put a fresh coat of paint inside the hospital, which last underwent a renovation in 1984.

"Today's news is incredible news," she said.

The deal with the city-county government benefits the state because the bonds wouldn't count against the state's overall debt level.

For UK's landlocked downtown campus, it would provide up to 30 acres for expansion.

Officials say they are unsure what type of facility would eventually be built there.

The community college received approval from the legislature in 2005 to build a new classroom facility, which it plans to place on the old hospital campus.

Demolishing the old hospital could be a long and difficult process, Beshear said. Some of the buildings have asbestos and there are burials on the property that have to be considered.

In addition, Health and Family Services Secretary Janie Miller said some of the buildings are historic properties.

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