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Homestead Group may merge

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Agency serving disabled seeks approval to affiliate with Seven Hills Foundation

By JOSEPH FITZGERALD

WOONSOCKET — The Homestead Group, formerly the Arc of Northern Rhode Island, has filed a notification of intent with the state to affiliate with the Seven Hills Foundation of Worcester, a health and human service agency that serves individuals with disabilities in more than 80 communities across Massachusetts.

Homestead Group CEO Robert L. Carl announced news of the affiliation Thursday, saying members of the Homestead Group's Board of Directors voted unanimously to affiliate at its meeting on Aug. 21. Board members from Seven Hills Foundation had voted previously to endorse the affiliation. The Homestead Group, one of the state's largest non-profit agencies supporting over 800 Rhode Islanders with disabilities, filed the notification of intent with the Rhode Island Department of Mental Health, Retardation & Hospitals earlier last week. The state process to approve the partnership will take about 60 days.

"This is a major initiative for the Homestead Group in many ways because we are affiliating with a very successful organization," Carl said. "They (Seven Hills Foundation) will bring many substantive improvements to our capacity, especially in the areas of training, program development and financial management."

According to Carl, Homestead Group will retain its name and 501C-3 non-profit status and continue to operate programs and serve clients from its headquarters at 68 Cumberland St. in Woonsocket. The non-profit organization provides employment, recreation and residential services to nearly 1,000 children and adults with developmental disabilities. The organization also employs 1,000 individuals on a full and part-time basis at its 17 group homes and work sites.

"Our capital assets and resources will remain in Rhode Island, fully dedicated to the support of people with disabilities from Rhode Island," Carl said. "The primary change is one of governance, with the Seven Hills Foundation board assuming responsibility for The Homestead Group."

The affiliation with Seven Hills Foundation, he said will result in "strengthened programming, more efficient operations, lower overhead and appropriate investments in the future for new program development." "We look forward to a bright future together," Carl said.

Back in February, it was Carl who sounded the alarm over proposed state budget cuts, saying Gov. Donald L. Carcieri's proposed supplemental budget at the time threatened to seriously undermine the organization's ability to serve clients. The Homestead Group operates on a \$17 million budget, which is funded mostly through the state's Medicaid program. A very small portion of the funding is provided through private donations and local school districts.

The Homestead Group, formerly the Arc of Northern Rhode Island, began in 1954 when several parents of children with disabilities met in response to an ad placed in "The Call" by Mr. and Mrs. Nate Miller, according to the Homestead Group's Web site. The primary focus in the 1950s by these parents was to provide day care, education and recreation for their children. In July 2006, the Arc of Northern Rhode Island became known as the Homestead Group. Program expansion that year included the opening of Homestead Gardens in North Smithfield, as well as the opening of an Early Intervention program that provides support for newborns and toddlers. Earlier this year, however, Homestead closed its facility in North Smithfield due to the cuts in state support.

"Like a lot of businesses and organizations in the city, if we don't get more funds and our expenses keep increasing it's hard to survive," said Felicia Lesnett, Homestead Group's marketing and communications manager. "Affiliating with Seven Hills Foundation will be a great match and greatly improve our services. We do excellent work and Seven Hill recognizes that."

The Seven Hills Foundation, established in 1951, currently offers program sites at 125 locations throughout Massachusetts employing nearly 2,000 professionals. Seven Hills Foundation offers a continuum of support and services to 26,000 individuals with disabilities and life challenges through affiliate organizations that are part of the Foundation.

The agency offers advocacy, residential and home care, supportive living options, transportation, respite services, school, therapeutic and social recreation, behavioral health programs and education services.



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