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Peabody to close its AIDS housing

As use of the facility drops off, Peabody center turns its efforts to services and funding independent living.

By *KELLEY BOUCHARD and MEREDITH GOAD, Staff Writers*

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1998 Press Herald File

Frances Peabody, one of the founders of Peabody House.

Peabody House, the only assisted-living facility in Maine founded specifically for people with HIV and AIDS, will close by the end of the year because of declining demand, officials at the Frannie Peabody Center announced Tuesday.

Since it opened on Valentine's Day in 1995, the six-bed facility in Portland's West End has provided a home for 71 people with HIV/AIDS. Thirty-nine of those residents died there.

The pending closure reflects the fact that new drugs help people with HIV/AIDS manage the disease better and live longer, said Patti Capouch, executive director of the Frannie Peabody Center, the nonprofit agency that runs Peabody House.

Since 2005, Peabody House has been fully occupied only 10 of 42 months. In the same period, people with HIV/AIDS showed greater need for assistance with independent housing, which the center supports by providing \$1 million in grant-funded vouchers each year.

"So, we're really going to be shifting our focus (to) independent housing programs," Capouch said.

Peabody House will remain open until alternative housing and support services are found for the five people living there. "That's our priority," Capouch said.

Capouch emphasized that only Peabody House will close. The center will continue to provide prevention programs and other HIV/AIDS services to more than 1,000 people statewide each year.

"HIV has not gone away," Capouch said. "We enrolled more people last year in our case management program than we ever have in the history of the organization, so we've got a lot of work to do."

Frannie Peabody Center provided case management services to 312 clients statewide in 2007, and served 414 people in various housing programs, including 240 new housing subsidies, Capouch said.

Peabody House was founded by five activists, including its namesake and champion, Frances Peabody, who saw a need to provide respite and hospice care for people in the advanced stages of AIDS.




"One thing about Frannie: She was adaptable," said Chris Behan, a founder and former board member. "Under the circumstances, I think she would look at this and say, 'You're doing the right thing.'"

Behan said he has mixed feelings about the pending closure. He said he understands that Peabody House couldn't be financially viable without six full-time residents and the health care subsidies they get from the state.

"I'm happy that Peabody House isn't needed as much as it was in the past, but some people still need that level of support," Behan said. "Peabody House was a miracle because the community came together and supported it. Now, the burden is on the community once again to care for its most vulnerable people."

Cynthia Cushing has the same concern. She lived at Peabody House from October 2004 through December 2006. Diagnosed with AIDS in 1996, her struggle with drug and alcohol abuse didn't end until she got there.

She arrived after she had several small strokes and spent a month at Maine Medical Center.

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PEABODY HOUSE HISTORY

1993

FIVE LOCAL ACTIVISTS –

Frances Peabody, Chris Behan, Peter Haffenreffer, Mallory Marshall and Sandy Titus – start fundraising to establish an assisted-living facility for people with advanced AIDS.

1995

PEABODY HOUSE opens on Valentine's Day at 14 Orchard St. in Portland's West End. The six-bed facility is named for Peabody, the "grande dame" of volunteers and one of five founding trustees.

1998

GOV. ANGUS KING declares April 18-25 to be Frances Peabody Week. Two years later, Peabody and MTV receive AIDS Action 2000 National Leadership Awards.

2001

FRANCES PEABODY DIES on June 26 at age 98. Peabody House and The AIDS Project, which she helped to start, merge to form the Frannie Peabody Center. 2005

THE PEABODY CENTER moves from the State Theater building on Congress Street to 335

Valley St.

2008

THE CENTER'S BOARD of trustees decides to close and sell Peabody House by end of the year.

"Peabody House gave me time to heal and learn to take care of myself," said Cushing. "It changed my life."

She now lives independently in Portland, thanks to a rental voucher she receives through Frannie Peabody Center. She stopped smoking cigarettes, has been sober for 20 months and attends a 12-step program.

Cushing said that although she is still considered HIV-positive and is plagued by various debilitating health problems, she no longer shows signs of the virus in her blood because of the medical care she receives.


She worries that others won't have the same opportunities she had at Peabody House.

"It's really sad that it's going to close," Cushing said.

Capouch said a closing ceremony will be scheduled so volunteers, donors and families whose loved ones died at Peabody House can say goodbye.

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