Carville center conversion plan on track

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Plans to transfer the U.S. Public Health Service's Hansen's disease hospital in Carville from the federal government to the state and convert it into a training and education academy continue to move forward.

"Lawyers are talking to lawyers, federal to state" to iron out the details of a transfer agreement, U.S. Rep. Richard Baker, D-Baton Rouge, said Monday.

Gov. Mike Foster wrote into the budget the state Legislature will consider later this year a $3.8 million allocation to fund the state's part of the conversion and renovation, Baker said.

"We feel very comfortable about that passing. It fits very closely with the governor's school-to-work initiative. I know of no opposition to the project on any level," he said.

A consortium of lawmakers, educators and a federal judge proposed the conversion in 1997. Baker shepherded legislation through Congress, authorizing and funding the change. President Clinton signed the bill into law in November.

An ever-dwindling number of Hansen's disease patients living at the 300-acre hospital spurred federal Department of Health and Human Services officials to look for other uses.

Patients who currently live at the hospital will not be able to take $30,000 annual living allowances until after the transfer becomes official, Baker said. Other patients who want to live independently and wish to stay at Carville can apply to the HHS secretary for permission to stay, he said. "Full services will be maintained until the last patient leaves the site."

The department is accepting proposals from Baton Rouge-area health-care providers to care for patients who cannot or do not want to stay, Baker said.

Public Health Service employees must also wait for the final agreement before they can take retirement benefits, Baker said.

Under Baker's most optimistic estimate, the first class of 250 students could enter the boot-camp-style Carville Academy run by the Louisiana National Guard by September to begin studying for their General Educational Development examinations.

The academy will be modeled on Youth ChalleNGe, a National Guard boot camp program at Camp Beauregard near Pineville.

His more realistic assessment: the first class could start in January or February.

An environmental assessment must be completed. Renovations must be bid, contracts awarded and the work finished, and the National Guard has to hire teachers and staff after the new state fiscal year starts in July, Baker said.

If negotiations over the permanent transfer agreement drag on, work on refurbishing the building the academy would use could begin under a short-term "use agreement," he said.

The first class will hold about 250, and plans call for two classes a year, Baker said. That could be expanded to 800 to 1,000 students per class, he said.

The federally operated Job Corps is considering Carville for a job-training program that would dovetail with the GED program, Baker said.

"When the student gets his GED, he just goes across the street for job training."

Under the transfer agreement, the 300-acre hospital campus, along with its various buildings and nine-hole golf course, can only be used "to educate at-risk youth," Baker said.

"I'm sure there will be creative folks who will try to meet those requirements. As long as I'm involved, I will try and make sure they will follow the mission," he said.

"We'd like to have the resources to add another nine holes and make it a public course. We have the room," Baker said. That could be done in conjunction with a training program in golf course management, he said.

"We view everything on that site ... as a job-training program," Baker said.

For example, the food-service facilities could be used for training. "We're talking about more than teach people how to fry French fries," he said.

The extras like a bigger golf course or a hotel-training program will come later, Baker said.

"Initially, let's focus on the success of this Carville Academy. We need for our first class to be a success."