



Bentley announces transfer of Decatur's Wallace Center, empty for 10 years, to National Guard for training facility

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DECATUR, Alabama - After four years and \$10 million in federal funding, the abandoned Lurleen B. Wallace Development Center in Decatur will become a training center for the Alabama National Guard.

Gov. Robert Bentley made the formal announcement this morning that the state is transferring ownership of the 20 buildings and 160 acres, which have been empty for most of the 10 years since the center closed.

"It's just ridiculous to have a facility like this and not put it to use," the governor said during a ceremony at the center off U.S. Highway 31.

[Maj. Gen. Perry Smith](#), adjutant general of the Alabama National Guard, explained plans to renovate the facility.

"In the next four years, we intend to spend \$9 million in reconstruction costs and another \$1 million in demolition costs - all federal money," he said. "We want to take these buildings and revitalize them."

When completed, it will include barracks, a dining room, training areas and a medical facility.

"It just so happened that, in our strategic plan, we had been looking for a piece of property like this in this part of the state for quite some time," Smith said. "The Alabama National Guard is really delighted to have this facility and get this show on the road."

Bentley said he considers the transfer a boost for economic development.

"It will be an asset not only to our Guard but it will be an asset to the people of Decatur," he said.

[Sen. Arthur Orr](#), R-Decatur, said mental health and development officials tried for years to sell the property, which is bordered on the north and south by Wheeler National Wildlife Refuge.

Orr said in the decade since the center closed, taxpayers would see the deteriorating property and wonder why it remained empty. He showed the facility to Bentley and Smith, who formulated a plan to create the training center.

"Thanks to the vision of these two men, we are finally able to answer the question, 'What's the state going to do with this prime asset?'" Orr said.

The developmental center for the mentally disabled, one of four statewide that was the idea of then-governor [Lurleen Wallace](#), opened in 1971 after her death and closed in 2003. Bentley, a physician, said the developmental centers served their purpose.

"Those facilities were no longer needed because those patients needed to be out in the real world and treated normally," he said.

David Jackson of the [Alabama Department of Mental Health](#) explained Wallace's vision, saying she wanted to create centers not only to provide support for the mentally challenged but to create sustainable community programs to benefit them long-term.

"Now, people are being provided services in their own communities," Jackson said. "These facilities literally worked themselves out of a job."