

MEDIA RELEASE

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Disability Advocates to Protest Waltham Light Show at Abandoned Institution

A coalition of leading disability rights advocates from across Massachusetts will protest against the City of Waltham and the Waltham Lions Club this Friday. The action follows a November 9 letter from the advocates calling on the city and Lions to relocate a holiday light show currently being set up in the ruins of the former Walter E. Fernald Developmental Center. The Fernald was a state institution where thousands of disabled people were raped, tortured, abused, and ultimately died. **1500 people have [signed a petition in support](#) of their effort**, but their calls have gone unanswered by the City and the Lions.

[The protest](#) will be held at noon at Waltham City Hall, 610 Main Street, on Friday, November 20. A Covid-safe, car-led caravan protest will then head to the Fernald at 200 Trapelo Road, for a moment of silence.

In their letter to Waltham Mayor Jeannette A. McCarthy, the advocates—including The Arc of Massachusetts, the Disability Law Center, the Boston Center for Independent Living, and the MetroWest Center for Independent Living—said the use of the site was disturbing and inappropriate, given its history of human rights abuses and experimentation on children.

“Hosting a holiday light show here ignores the fact that the people who lived at the Fernald School were denied holidays with their families and loved ones for generations,” the advocates wrote. The light show, which is slated for November 27-January 3 is being conducted as a fundraiser by the Lions.

Former state commissioner for the Mass Rehabilitation Commission Charlie Carr said, “I was a resident of Waltham for five years, right up the street from Fernald at another institution, Middlesex County Hospital. Even then I would hear of the horror stories of how children and adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities were treated at Fernald. I was fortunate to get out of Middlesex and live a full life in the community but that’s not true for most of my brothers and sisters who lived and died at Fernald.”

Carr, who is a signatory to the letter and co-organizer of the petition, added, “I love Waltham and I believe that the Lions Club generally does very good work but, for the life of me, I don’t understand why Mayor McCarthy and Lions Club leadership won’t meet with disability rights advocates to listen to our reasons why we believe so strongly that it is completely inappropriate to hold a holiday event on the grounds of a state institution that has a documented history of abusing and torturing those that were social throwaways and were incarcerated for a lifetime. I still want to love Waltham and believe in the work that the Lions Club does, but they have to find an appropriate venue to have this event.”

Given the ongoing pandemic, the advocates also criticized organizers for advertising limousines and bus rentals for large groups. “During a pandemic in which thousands of disabled residents have died across the Commonwealth...it is an affront to see this event marketed for bus tours and limousine tours, which encourage the very gatherings that spread Covid-19 and disproportionately impact people in our communities,” they wrote. Waltham is currently facing an alarming rise in cases of Covid-19.

The advocates say they will continue to take action until they receive a meeting with the Mayor and the event is moved. In its place, they called on the city to fulfill promises to create a memorial to deceased former residents along with a disability history museum at the site, both of which have stalled.

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