

Labor in Focus by Janet West

U.S. 'care-less' of mentally ill

A recent report charges that the nation has gone backwards almost two centuries in this field.

On any given day throughout the United States, somewhere around 250,000 seriously mentally ill people are on our streets, in the prisons, or in the homeless shelters. This is the estimate issued in a recent study jointly produced by the Public Citizen Health Research Group and the National Alliance for the Mentally Ill (NAMI).

This contrasts to the 68,000 patients with schizophrenia and manic-depressive psychosis, currently in the nation's 286 state and county psychiatric hospitals.

The report states bluntly: "We have . . . returned to where we began 170 years ago; at no time in the intervening years have there been as many seriously mentally ill individuals, most receiving no treatment, living in the community."

The study evaluates numerous facilities for the mentally ill, and using a point system, "grades" them on their ability to serve those for whom they were originally established.

It also cites how problems may have occurred because of the apparent movement of mental health professionals from the public sector to private practice.

"Virtually every mental health professional trained in the United States since 1948 has had the majority of his or her training costs subsidized by . . . federal and state funds. . . . No payback option was included with the subsidized training."

Many community health centers receive state and federal funds to operate. What kind of mental illness do they treat? If one has a "life adjustment problem" rather than a primary

brain disease; or if one needs "counseling," but not if one's mental illness means that one needs medication and vocational rehabilitation.

The report evaluated the states according to a "point" system, which assigned 0 to 5 points for: 1) hospitals, 2) outpatient/community support, 3) vocational rehabilitation, 4) housing, and 5) children.

At the top of their list was Vermont, which scored 17 points out of a potential 25, and Hawaii ranked last, coming in with 2 points. Many states (44) failed to get even one-half of the total possible points.

The District of Columbia, the nation's capital, came in on the low end—tied for 31st place with six other states, with 7 points out of 25. It is estimated that there are 8,000 mentally ill in the District. About 1,300 are patients at St. Elizabeth's psychiatric hospital, and some 25% of the inmates in the D.C. jail are seriously mentally ill.

The report states that "psychiatric care at overcrowded St. Elizabeth's has deteriorated significantly in the past two years," noting "a nursing shortage, increased use of patient seclusion and restraints . . . medication errors, and poor care in general . . . a patient's chances of getting first-class care approaches the chances of winning the D.C. Lottery."

The report renders scathing attacks on the abysmal funding and in other cases, the apathetic approach to treating of the seriously mentally ill. Many states are cited:

Massachusetts. Budget cuts pose a significant threat to mental health services. A *New York Times* article

quotes the Secretary of Human Services, Dr. Philip Jonston, in response to the latest round of cuts, "the words 'devastation and destruction have become meaningless. . . . The mentally ill, the mentally retarded, the elderly and the homeless take it on the chin.'"

Georgia. " 'Bus therapy,' whereby some rural regional programs give seriously mentally ill individuals one-way tickets to Atlanta or Savannah, has not gone completely out of style in Georgia."

Texas. "In the use of state funds for the training of psychiatrists, the Department of Psychiatry at Southwestern Medical School in Dallas gets \$370,000 per year to train psychiatrists, who then go off to private practice to make \$200,000 to \$300,000 per year (according to the *Dallas Morning News*), while Dallas County Mental Health-Mental Retardation has to turn away all new cases (as reported in September 1989) because it cannot hire any psychiatrists."

Wyoming. It has only recently organized a Department of Health. For the last century, the state hospital has been lumped together with the state prison under the Department of Institutions.

Hawaii. "In December 1989, Hawaii State Hospital was . . . inspected . . . by the U.S. Department of Justice to investigate allegations that hospital patients were being deprived of their civil rights. They found the hospital . . . in abysmal shape . . . 'the amount of food available to serve patients was consistently inadequate,' [there was] 'a serious cockroach infestation' in the kitchen, and 'numerous puddles of urine.'"

Shocking, but not too surprising in a nation that has all but abandoned its commitment to progress, and to the sanctity of human life.