

Society is better served accepting mentally handicapped into its realm

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Disability groups were astonished at the NDP government's recent decision to temporarily stop the deinstitutionalization of people with mental handicaps.

In light of the government's move, it is worth examining the lessons from the "first wave of deinstitutionalization" in the 1980s throughout Canada when several institutions closed and most large facilities significantly reduced their populations. More than 4,000 Ontarians with mental disabilities have returned to their communities since the late 1970s.

Policies designed to move people from institutions to the community have been influenced by enlightenment and economics. The "community living" movement has caught the imagination of many citizens and political leaders who now believe that people with disabilities should be welcomed into our communities.

Disability advocate groups have been pushing hard to enhance human rights through institutional closures. In those provinces that are planning to close all institutions, such as British Columbia, the hard work of disability rights groups has been a great influence.

Government desire to save money has also guided these policies. Although we know that deinstitutionalization does not save in the short term, in the long run significant savings can be gained if facilities are closed. In Ontario, where institutions are merely downsized, running two parallel systems is costly.

A decade ago, many communities responded to such schemes with fear and prejudice. The NIMBY (Not in my back yard) syndrome of the 1980s had died down by the end of the decade. A recent study says the development of 71 group homes resulted in negative reactions from only three communities.

Several factors account for this change. In addition to more general positive attitudes towards disability, community service providers have learned that small homes are much more appropriate for residents and will be more accepted by the public. Also, municipalities themselves have generally developed policies which encourage the dispersment of homes throughout a community.

Despite some positive trends in deinstitutionalization, the reality is that community living in many ways has little to do with "community." Recent research shows, for example, that many group homes that have turned out to be mini-institutions as

characterized by social isolation. They simply re-create institutionalization on a smaller scale, with residents having little input.

In those places where deinstitutionalization has enhanced quality of life, planning has been focused on the individual, the family and other members of the person's support network. Individuals have choice and control over where, and with whom, they will live. The purpose is to enhance community participation, rebuild relationships with families and other citizens, and expand decision-making and responsibility of the individual. Residents of such settings gradually become part community life and are involved in neighborhoods, churches, recreation settings and jobs.

Those with stakes in institutions continue to resist further closings. It is not surprising that institutional workers are often cautious and fearful of closures and downsizing. Unfortunately, their own fears are often buried in the strongly voiced beliefs that the people they support will find it too difficult to go back to the community. Ironically, a recent study shows that the greatest fear for those with disabilities is that they will be institutionalized.

Governments must be prepared to meet the needs of both these groups - institutional workers and those labelled with a disability. While deinstitutionalization must be a united effort, with workers playing a vital role, the rights of individuals with disabilities must be primary.

While numerous mistakes have been made, we can now meet the goal of enhanced quality of life and citizen. The NDP government of Ontario, with its concern for social justice, has an opportunity to respond to this goal with a strong commitment to personalized community living. The current moratorium should end soon so that people with mental disabilities who sit in our institutions as exiles from our communities will be given a better break.

John Lord is co-ordinator of the Centre for Research and Education in Human Services in Kitchener, and author of *Return to the Community: the Process of Closing an Institution*.

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