

Part V: Toward New Service Models

Chapter 6

Recommendations for Institutional Reform

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RECOMMENDATIONS FOR INSTITUTIONAL REFORM

In an earlier section of this monograph I have described my reactions to conditions widely encountered in American institutions for the retarded. Below, I am offering a number of recommendations.

My recommendations derive from many sources: my experiences prior to this study, what I observed during the study, the reactions of many astute individuals to this study, and the advice of students and colleagues. In addition to the emergency need for at least doubling per capita expenditures in state institutions and for reducing the sizes of institutional populations wherever and however possible, my study of this problem leads to an additional set of recommendations that may contribute to an improvement of institutional programs and facilities:

1. In each state, a board of institutional visitors should be appointed by the governor or other constituted authority. This board would be responsible for reporting directly to the highest state officials. Appointments to this board would be made irrespective of political party affiliation, and these appointments should be contingent on both knowledge of the broad field of human welfare and demonstrated public service. Members of this board of visitors would not be, concurrently, members of any particular institution's staff or board of trustees.

2. Within each state institution for the mentally retarded, each department (e.g., medical, psychological, educational, nursing, cottage life) should have a board of advisers. This board of advisers, through periodic visits and consultations, would know the institution and its problems intimately and thus be in a position to advise and assist in the resolution of difficulties. In essence, the advisory board would be organized for direct consultation and assistance to the institutional staff. As this board would not be responsible for rating institutional personnel or recommending their salary increments or promotions, it is possible that members of this board would become involved with the most pressing and severe problems of the institution- -without "endangering" the positions of the staff that trusts them. In this way, it would be possible for problems currently secreted from the outside world to be given the exposure and ventilation needed for satisfactory solutions to them.

3. Can one any longer ignore the needed relationship between the state institution for the mentally retarded and the state university? In each state, a state university should be given responsibility and resources to provide comprehensive in-service training and consultation for all institutional employees, from the chief administrative officer to the rawest attendant recruit.

4. In each state, at least one state institution for the mentally retarded should be designated as a center for the in-service training of all personnel to be employed for state service in institutions and clinics for the mentally retarded. As a condition for employment as institutional superintendent, psychologist, teacher, nurse, or attendant the candidate would have to spend a specified period of time at the training center. His preparation program would range from a few weeks to one calendar year, depending upon his background and experiences and the nature of the position he intends to assume. During this training program the candidate would be involved in clinical experiences that relate directly to his future employment, would participate in seminars, colloquia, and other instructional experiences designed to prepare him for the sensitive and demanding activities of work with the mentally retarded. At the end of the candidate's training program, the director of this facility and his staff would rate the candidate and recommend him or not recommend him for employment. To the degree that this program is workable with currently employed staff, every inducement and encouragement should be provided to permit them to complete this preparation.

There is a shame in America. Countless human beings are suffering--needlessly. Countless more families of these unfortunate victims of society's irresponsibility are in anguish, for they know, or suspect, the truth. Unwittingly, or unwillingly, they have been forced to institutionalize their loved ones into a life of degradation and horror.

I challenge every institution in America to look at itself, now! I challenge each institution to examine its program, its standards, its admission policies, its personnel, its budget, its philosophy, its objectives. I challenge every institution--and every governor and every legislator--to justify its personnel and their practices, its size and development, and its budget.

My experiences during Christmas 1965 require me to call for a national examination of every institution for the mentally retarded in America--an examination that will inspect the deepest recesses of the most obscure back ward in the least progressive state. I call for a national examination of state budgets for the care and treatment of the retarded. I hold responsible each superintendent, each commissioner of mental health, each governor, each thoughtful citizen for the care and treatment of individuals committed for institutionalization in their state.

To some degree, all of us talk and behave as if we will not change. Yet, it is absolutely certain that we will change; what we profess now, in one way or another, we regret later. By this I mean that the most difficult truth each of us has to learn and live with is the knowledge that we are not perfect. It was my intent in this article to point out some of the more serious imperfections of state

institutional programs for the mentally retarded in this country. It is my belief that, now that our most indefensible practices have been laid bare for public scrutiny, men of good will from all walks of life and all professions will sit down at the planning table and seek solutions to the plight of our brethren.