



Did the Conscientious Objectors Make a Difference?

Did the actions of the conscientious objectors (COs) in exposing conditions at institutions during and immediately after World War II make a difference in America's care and treatment of people with mental illness and mental retardation? The answer to this question is most certainly "Yes," but it is difficult to say how much of a difference they made. Social change rarely follows a simple cause and effect pattern. Many factors contribute to any significant change in a society. For example, the COs were not the only ones advocating for the reform of institutions in the 1940s. Many national experts were also concerned about the treatment of people with mental illness and mental retardation. In addition, in 1946, Mary Jane Ward published a popular novel, The Snake Pit, realistically depicting conditions in mental hospitals.

There is also the matter of what constitutes real change. Media exposés of any kind often result in the removal of one official and the appointment of another. This occurred during the exposés of Cleveland State Hospital and Eastern State Hospital initiated by the COs. A change in the person in charge may or may not make a difference. When problems are deeply rooted, as they were at the institutions, it is unlikely to do so.

The exposés led by COs in the 1940s were not the first public exposés of institutions and would not be the last. In the national scope of these exposés and sheer number of newspaper and magazine articles, the efforts of the COs were unprecedented in bringing public attention to conditions and abuses at institutions. One can point to the following potential changes resulting from Civilian Public Service mental hospital program.

Following the exposés and continuing throughout the 1940s and into the 50s, spending on mental hospitals and training schools increased in many states, sometimes substantially. The institutions hired a significant number of additional attendants and professionals. Some states built new institutions or other facilities. After the 1946 Life Magazine exposé, Pennsylvania allocated \$80 million for new hospital construction.

Under the leadership of Governor Luther Youngdahl, Minnesota has been cited as a leader in institutional reform in the late 1940s and early 1950s. Governor Youngdahl established the Governor's Citizens Mental Health Committee to coordinate reform efforts and appointed Justin Reese, a former CO at Cleveland State Hospital, to serve as executive secretary. He also

increased funding for the state's institutions and for research and training. One of Governor Youngdahl's accomplishments was the dramatic reduction in the use of straight-jackets on patients. A 1951 photo of the Governor in Life showed him outside an institution overseeing a large pile of burning straight-jackets and other restraints.

Congress passed the National Mental Health Act in 1946. This marked the beginning of a federal commitment to funding for mental health training and research and for community psychiatric services.

The efforts of the National Mental Health Foundation (NMHF), which was founded by COs, to reduce the stigma associated with mental illness undoubtedly had an effect on public attitudes. The involvement of public leaders, media representatives, and celebrities in NMHF's public awareness campaigns encouraged public understanding of mental illness. Yet, many years later, a stigma is still attached to mental illness and mental retardation.

Immediately after the war, in 1946, the American Psychiatric Association responded to the negative publicity received by state mental hospitals and urged "its entire membership, including state mental hospital superintendents, to call forcefully to the attention of the public and their legislators all of the shortcomings and deficiencies in state hospitals, and to demand the assistance and backing necessary to maintain mental hospitals in fact as well as in name." The Association recognized that the public would not consider psychiatry a "legitimate scientific branch of medicine" as long as state institutions were so poorly funded.

Mennonites represented the largest single religion of the COs during World War II, and the Mennonite Central Committee sponsored units at 23 state mental hospitals and five training schools. This experience had a profound effect on the COs. After the end of the war, they remained committed to the humane care of people with mental illness. In 1947, the Mennonite Central Committee established Mennonite Mental Health Services to operate small mental hospitals.

Between 1947 and 1956, the Mennonites established three "homes" for people with mental illness in California, Kansas, and Maryland. Although all three hospitals were planned to serve Mennonites with mental illness or mental retardation, they accepted non-Mennonites when they were opened. Each of the hospitals also was planned to serve a specialized purpose. Brook Lane in Maryland was intended for people who needed short-term treatment during a time of crisis. Kings View in California was to provide long-term care to people with severe, chronic mental illness. Prairie View in Kansas was designed to be a training and education center. After they opened, however, all three focused on serving people with acute mental

illness who needed short-term “active treatment.” Psychiatrists at the hospitals were more interested in treating this population than people with more severe conditions.

Arthur Jost, who had been a CO at Utah State Hospital during the war, was the administrator of Kings View. In 1957, he was instrumental in lobbying for a California law to make state funds available to private agencies offering community mental health services. By 1974, Kings View had taken over responsibility for providing community mental health services in nine California counties.

In 1951, Albert Q. Maisel, the reporter who wrote the 1946 Life Magazine article based on the COs’ accounts, spent six months visiting 30 mental hospitals to see what reforms had been made. On November 12, 1951, he published a follow-up article in Life, “Scandal Results in Real Reforms.” Maisel reported that states had increased funding and added staff to the mental hospitals and singled out Minnesota Governor Youngdahl for his reforms. He also described the split between “brick and mortar” reformers who favored major construction to overcome severe overcrowding and those at the Menninger clinic in Kansas and others who emphasized intensive treatment to enable patients to return to the community. Maisel estimated that two-thirds of the nation’s 207 mental hospitals had made substantial progress since 1946.

Two photos accompanying Maisel’s story are especially telling. Both were taken of the same room at Byberry Hospital in Pennsylvania. One was captioned “1946: Nakedness and Idleness.” The photo showed a partial shot of a room with roughly 30 naked men sitting on the floor and wondering around amid puddles on the floor. The second photo was captioned: “1951: Chairs and a TV Show to Watch.” This photo showed about 20 men, wearing heavy, drab clothing, sitting on chairs and benches and facing an unshown part of the room.

The population of state mental hospitals increased up until the mid-1950s, when they reached their peak of about 559,000 persons. Institutions for people with mental retardation grew up until 1967, when they peaked at a total population of 194,650. Since those years, the populations of institutions have steadily declined in line with new philosophies of supporting people with psychiatric and intellectual disabilities in the community.

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