Conscientious Objectors at State Institutions

From 1942 to 1947, approximately 3,000 Conscientious Objectors (COs) worked at 56 state mental hospitals and institutions for people with mental retardation in 22 states as an alternative to military service. What they found shocked them: overcrowding, understaffing, neglect, abuse, and brutality. What began as an attempt to address severe staff shortages at institutions during World War II resulted in a national campaign to reform America's treatment of people with mental illness and mental retardation.

Most COs worked as attendants at the institutions and were responsible for maintaining the wards on which people lived and basic care and supervision for the inmates or patients, as they were called. In return, most received room and board and a small monthly allowance, but no wages. Religious organizations, primarily the American Friends Service Committee, the Mennonite Central Committee, and the Brethren Service Committee sponsored CO units at each of the institutions and took care of the men's living expenses.

Work at the institutions was difficult and stressful. The COs, like regular attendants, worked long hours and contended with shortages of basic supplies, including clothing, cleaning materials, towels, and sheets. Their time was devoted to keeping the wards as clean and orderly as possible and trying to make sure the patients were safe and treated well. Warren Sawyer, a young Quaker CO, described Philadelphia State Hospital: "It has 6,100 patients in residence. Before the war it was staffed by over 65 doctors. Now there are only 18, plus a few interns. Similarly, there was one attendant for every 25 patients; now there is only one attendant for every 500 patients."

Before long, the COs started to bring the conditions at institutions to the attention of the media and public officials. Exposés of institutions appeared in newspapers across the country. At Eastern State Hospital in Virginia, COs were successful in having the State Hospital Board conduct an investigation of conditions. The reports of COs at a formal hearing were widely reported in the Richmond Times-Dispatch, which wrote editorials calling for change. Eastern's Superintendent and other institutional officials, who initially disputed the COs' accounts, eventually resigned.

In fall, 1943, COs at Cleveland State Hospital took their complaints about substandard conditions and patient abuse to a reporter at the Cleveland Press, Walter Lerch, and the

executive secretary of the Cleveland Baptist Association, the Rev. Dores Sharpe. For months, stories detailing the COs' charges appeared in the newspaper. Cleveland State's superintendent responded by denying widespread abuse and shutting down the CO unit.

Rev. Sharpe rallied Church and civic groups to demand an investigation of the hospital, and Lerch continued to write stories documenting mistreatment. Ohio's governor established a committee, which confirmed the COs' allegations, and appointed a new reform-minded state commissioner of mental health. Rev. Sharpe subsequently was named foreman of the Cuyahoga County Grand Jury and launched another inquiry into abuses at Cleveland State Hospital. The Grand Jury issued a scathing report condemning subhuman conditions at the institution: "The Grand Jury is shocked beyond words that a so-called civilized society would allow fellow human beings to be mistreated as they are at the Cleveland State Hospital. No enlightened community dare tolerate the conditions that exist at this institution."

One important ally in the COs' efforts to improve the treatment of people with mental illness and mental retardation was Eleanor Roosevelt, the wife of the recently deceased President of the United States, Franklin D. Roosevelt. When COs at Hudson River State Hospital in Poughkeepsie, New York reported on patient abuse in 1945, the superintendent fired four accused attendants. The American Legion and then the Poughkeepsie New Yorker challenged the firing of the attendants and questioned whether the COs were receiving favorable treatment by the superintendent. Mrs. Roosevelt, who lived in that part of New York State, met with the COs and supported them in her national newspaper column, "My Day." The Poughkeepsie New Yorker then wrote an editorial acknowledging the contributions of the COs.

Like their counterparts at other institutions, COs at Philadelphia State Hospital, or Byberry as it was sometimes called, were concerned about the treatment of patients and the conditions under which they lived. However, they focused on addressing the problems on a national level. Their efforts resulted in major expose.

In 1944, COs at Byberry, with the support of the superintendent and the American Friends Service Committee, established a clearinghouse for sharing information among COs and concerned persons at institutions nationally. They began publishing a national newsletter, The Attendant (later named The Psychiatric Aide), on humane care of people with mental illness. Next, the COs sent a questionnaire to all men serving at Civilian Public Service mental hospital units asking them for information about conditions and the treatment of patients. The reports they received from approximately 1,400 people formed the basis for the book, Out of Sight, Out of Mind, which was published by the National Mental Health Foundation, founded by COs in 1946.

Charles Pickett of the American Friends Service Committee (Quakers) introduced the Byberry COs to prominent Philadelphia civic leaders who, in turn, put them in contact with other national figures. In September, 1945, Pickett arranged for two of the COs to meet with Eleanor Roosevelt. They showed Mrs. Roosevelt photos of Byberry taken by a CO who had hidden a camera under his shirt. She was appalled and agreed to lend her name to the COs' efforts.

With an introduction by one of the COs' national supporters, Leonard Cornell, a Byberry CO, met with one of the senior editors of Reader's Digest. Cornell showed the editor the Byberry photos. These were enough to interest the editor. Unknown to the COs, Albert Q. Maisel, a reporter who had just published an expose of veterans' hospitals had approached Life Magazine, which was published by the same company as Reader's Digest, to do a similar story on mental hospitals. Life Magazine agreed to publish an article, with a condensed version to be published in Reader's Digest, and put Maisel in contact with the COs.

On May 6, 1946, Life published an article by Maisel titled, "Bedlam 1946: Most U.S. Mental Hospitals are a Shame and a Disgrace." The title of the article was taken from the shortened version of the name of a London asylum, Bethlehem, which had become synonymous with noise and confusion. Accompanied by photos captioned with terms such as "Neglect," "Restraint," "Useless Work," "Nakedness," "Overcrowding," and "Forced Labor," the article reported widespread abuse, brutality, and substandard conditions at mental hospitals throughout the nation. According to Maisel, "Thousands spend their days—often for weeks at a stretch—locked in devices euphemistically called 'restraints': thick leather handcuffs, great canvas camisoles, 'muffs,' 'mitts,' wristlets, locks and straps and restraining sheets. Hundreds are confined in 'lodges'—bare, bedless rooms reeking with filth and feces—by day lit only through half-inch holes in steel-plated windows, by night merely black tombs in which the cries of the insane echo unheard from the peeling plaster of the walls."

Maisel based his article on court documents, newspaper stories, his own observations, and the accounts and photos of the COs. Regarding the COs, referred to as "conchies," Maisel wrote: "One may differ, as I do, with the views that led these young men to take up a difficult and unpopular position against service in the armed forces. But one cannot help but recognize their honesty and sincerity in reporting upon the conditions they found in the hospitals to which they were assigned." Reader's Digest published a short version of this article in July, 1946.

In 1946 and 1947, reporter Albert Deutsch, well known for his history of mental illness in America, published about 50 articles in the New York newspaper PM on conditions in mental hospitals based on his first-hand observations, the accounts of the COs, and investigations of

Cleveland State Hospital and other institutions. Deutsch characterized the COs' documentation as "a damning indictment of our institutional treatment of the mentally sick."

By the time Out of Sight, Out of Mind was published, the conditions and abuses at institutions recorded by the COs already had received considerable public attention.

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