



The National Mental Health Foundation

The seeds of the National Mental Health Foundation (NMHF) were planted in 1945 when four COs at Philadelphia State Hospital, or Byberry, sent a letter to each of the Civilian Public Service (CPS) mental hospital units announcing plans for a national campaign to improve the care and treatment of people with mental illness. This public campaign was launched the following year to coincide with the publication of Life Magazine's article, "Bedlam 1946: Most U.S. Mental Hospitals are a Shame and a Disgrace." The same day the Life article was published the Associated Press and United Press sent articles to newspapers across the country announcing that former U.S. Supreme Court Justice Owen J. Roberts and 38 other public figures, including Eleanor Roosevelt, had agreed to serve as sponsors of the NMHF.

Throughout the CPS mental hospital project, many COs worked hard to develop relationships with national mental health leaders, newspaper editors and reporters, and public figures. Some COs had training and advanced degrees in medicine, law, and other fields and contacts with influential figures. The COs also used their religious affiliations to help identify sympathetic national leaders. At Byberry and other institutions, the COs worked cooperatively with superintendents, who put them in contact with mental health experts. Much of the success of the COs and later the NMHF in obtaining public attention can be attributed to their relationships with prominent Americans who were willing to lend their names to their cause.

The publication of the book, Out of Sight, Out of Mind, written by Frank L. Wright based on the first-hand accounts of COs, and related media exposes kept conditions at state institutions in public view and in the national consciousness after World War II. Yet, exposing abuses at institutions represented only one of NMHF's priorities.

The foundation continued publishing The Attendant, renamed The Psychiatric Aide, which had been started by the Byberry COs, and also published handbooks or manuals on caring for mental patients. Throughout the late 1940s and into the 1950s, NMHF conducted aggressive public awareness campaigns to change public attitudes toward people with mental illness. These ranged from the production of numerous series of radio dramas broadcast throughout the U.S. and Canada to the publication of posters, booklets, and informational pamphlets. One of NMHF's influential sponsors, Barry Brigham, president of The Louisville

Courier-Journal and the American Newspaper Publishers Association, agreed to write a letter to other newspaper publishers encouraging them to publicize a “Mental Health Week,” sponsored by the U.S. Junior Chamber of Commerce, and to help remove the stigma of mental illness by abandoning use of out-dated terms such as insanity and lunacy.

NMHF also established a legal division to draft state legislation to expand the rights of people with mental illness regarding commitment to and discharge from mental hospitals.

In 1950, the National Mental Health Foundation merged with two other national groups, the National Committee for Mental Hygiene and the American Psychiatric Foundation, to create the National Association for Mental Health. The National Committee for Mental Hygiene was founded in 1909 by Clifford Beers, the author of a widely read book, A Mind That Found Itself, based on his experiences as a mental patient, along with mental health leaders and civic groups.

By the time of the merger, three of the four Byberry COs instrumental in the creation of the NMHF had left the organization. Throughout its short history, there had been tensions between some of its professional advisors, who believed that mental health experts should control the organization, and the non-medical COs. For some of the former COs, the creation of the National Association for Mental Health represented a surrender to professional experts.

The National Association for Mental Health is currently named the National Mental Health Association.

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