



A Woman's Crusade: Dorothea Dix

Dorothea Dix's crusade against the squalid conditions and harsh treatment of people with mental illness and mental retardation in jails and poorhouses in the 1840s and 50s captured national attention and places her as one of the leading reformers in antebellum America.

Over one three-year period in the 1840s, Dix traveled an estimated 10,000 miles throughout what was then the United States exposing conditions in town and county homes for the poor and dependent. During this time, the care of poor and needy people was almost exclusively the responsibility of local governments. Although some towns offered "outdoor relief"—direct assistance to people in need—the poorhouse, jail, or almshouse was the most common way of providing public assistance.

Dix's journey started in 1841 when she visited the East Cambridge jail in Massachusetts. A retired schoolteacher, Dix was approached by a young theological student who had been assigned to provide Sunday school instruction to women at the jail and wanted Dix's advice. Dix immediately volunteered to take over the task. When she visited the jail the next Sunday, she was shocked by what she saw: filth, lack of heat, signs of brutality and neglect. Especially troubling to Dix was the presence of people with mental illness locked in cells.

Over the next two years, Dix toured almshouses and jails throughout the Commonwealth, documenting conditions that paralleled those at East Cambridge. Based on her notes, she presented her observations in a memorial to the legislature, which she addressed in 1843 through the efforts of Dr. Samuel Gridley Howe, a member of the legislature, social reformer, and pioneer in the development of institutions for people who were blind or mentally retarded.

Dix's memorial was controversial in Massachusetts, and she was attacked by local officials in Massachusetts newspapers of inaccuracies, distortion, and slander. Dix also had her supporters, however, and these included prominent national figures. In addition to Howe, Horace Mann, a champion for public education, and Charles Sumner, later a U.S. Senator, founder of the Republican Party and abolitionist, provided strong support to Dix. The legislature subsequently approved an appropriation for the enlargement of Worcester State Hospital to accommodate people with mental illness.

Dix then took her crusade to other states. As in the case of Massachusetts, she toured poorhouses and then reported her findings to anyone who would listen. Dix addressed the legislatures of New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Kentucky, Tennessee, North Carolina, Mississippi, and Maryland between 1844 and 1952. She was instrumental in having New Jersey's legislature approve the establishment of Trenton state hospital.

For Dix, there was only one solution to the wretched conditions in the poorhouses: the creation of separate mental hospitals or asylums. She had no confidence in the ability to reform the poorhouses and was a staunch opponent of outdoor relief and family care.

Although Dix was an advocate for the establishment of state institutions, she believed that the federal government bore responsibility for financing the states' efforts. In 1848, she gave another stirring memorial, this time before the Congress of the United States. Dix proposed that the federal government grant public land to the states that could be sold to fund mental hospitals or asylums.

After six years of advocating for the land grant bill, Dix was successful in convincing both houses of Congress to pass what became known as the "12,225,000 Acre Bill" (10,000,000 acres for the "insane" and 2,225,000 acres for "deaf mutes"). To Dix's tremendous disappointment, President Franklin Pierce vetoed the Act and characterized it an unwarranted federal intrusion on state affairs.

During the Civil War, Dix served as the head of women nurses for the Union army. After the war, she resumed her efforts on behalf of people with mental illness.

Although Dix failed to have the federal government fund care of people with mental illness and mental retardation, her efforts, together with those of the emerging professional class, ultimately led states to take over responsibility for caring for people by establishing specialized hospitals and asylums. By 1860, 28 of the 33 states had established public insane asylums. Deutsch (1949) reported that Dix was personally responsible for the founding or enlargement of 32 mental hospitals in the United States and abroad. The first state institution for the feeble-minded was opened in Massachusetts in 1848, and by 1890, 20 such asylums had been established.

Dix died in 1887 at what she called her "first-born child," the New Jersey State Hospital at Trenton.

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