

THREE MONTHS OF PROGRESS AT POLK STATE SCHOOL & HOSPITAL

The bars are off the windows, and the door stands open in Cottage 1 at Polk State School. Three months after the controversial April 17 dismissal of the Superintendent of Polk State School and Hospital, Dr. James McClelland, Polk, outwardly hasn't changed much. Inside the large office with roll top desk, however, a flurry of activity during the past three months has generated a quiet excitement at the Institution. "I am quite enthused with the cooperation and willingness to develop some new program direction at Polk State School on the part of many staff," Joseph Colombatto, Acting Superintendent, said recently.

Polk, three months later, is not the same place. It never will be. The enthusiasm which Mr. Colombatto has referred to has generated excitement for:

...Forty-six staff members who have volunteered to take part in a projected experimental program on the Polk grounds. Called a Placement Readiness program, this innovation will allow those residents with potential for community placement an opportunity to learn and test their skills in a somewhat independent environment. Existing staff apartment housing will be used as residences for the young women. A series of planning sessions have been held to date to develop this program.

...A committee consisting of top level staff, child care aide staff members and residents at Polk has been appointed to analyze and compile all rules and policies

existing at Polk, both written and unwritten. This Policy and Rule Review Committee has been formulated in order to develop a consistent policy for both residents and staff which is fully understood by all.

...The Cottage 1 program, initiated in late April, is now totally open. The use of confinement calls, dry scrubs and punishment techniques has been abolished. The staff is involved in developing individual programming for each resident, and group recreation, work, and training programs are now a part of the every day routine. Attempts are being made to provide an individual program for each resident in this cottage, with specific goals for each resident in mind.

...A Referral and Placement Team developed with County Mental Health/Mental Retardation programs in the 14-county area served by Polk, as well as private agencies such as the Easter Seal Society, United Cerebral Palsy, etc., will hold meetings every Tuesday at Polk, with these county organizations, during which all referrals for services to the mentally retarded in the area will be discussed. Each referral will be discussed and evaluated in terms of how Polk might provide services through staff evaluations, etc., in the community, and how communities might better serve the retarded in their areas. This Referral and Placement Team, developed after a series of meetings between Mr. Colombatto and



Polk staff, MA/MR Directors from eight northwestern counties, and service agencies.

...A Parent-Staff Association has been organized at Polk State School and Hospital, by parents, with the support of the administration.

...In cooperation with the Venango County Action Program, an effort is being made to generate funding to attempt to develop a Foster Grandparent Program at Polk. The initial planning allows for 75 to 80 Foster Grandparents.

...Plans for the first Bar Mitzvah at Polk State School

and Hospital in the fall are being completed. Bar

Mitzvah preparations are underway now for Jewish resi-

dents, "Although it does not sound very significant,"

Colombatto stated, "It has a tremendous impact on

attitude for the families of these residents, and for

the staff that has worked with them."

...Clarion State College and Polk have developed a pilot

program which will begin in August on the campus of

Clarion State College. Fifteen residents from Polk

and fifteen retarded residents from communities in

the area will live in a dormitory on the Clarion

College campus for three weeks during August. Several

staff members from Polk, Clarion College staff, and

graduate students from Clarion State will serve as

houseparents, counsellors, and instructors during this

period. This experimental program was developed,



sponsored, and funded jointly by the Venango County MA/MR Office, Polk and Clarion. "We're going to take a look at it," Mr. Colombatto said. "Perhaps it can turn into a permanent program. It's being done in other states. This pilot program can show us where we need to go in terms of program, staff and all the other 'bugs' that need to be ironed out before a good ongoing program can be developed."

Pointing to what she termed "heartening beginnings," State Secretary of Public Welfare, Mrs. Helene Wohlgenuth outlined a goal-specific vocational training program which is in the process of being developed at Polk and will be implemented within the next two to three weeks. "Even with the existing problems at Polk, progress in the form of programs for residents who formerly had very little in the way of individual programming is under way. A vocational program which emphasizes the native abilities of severely retarded persons is a beginning. The increased involvement of local communities is a beginning. The formulation of a parents group is a beginning. The development of an attitude that these residents can be stimulated, can be helped, can be worked with is a beginning, and the ending will be a more humane and socially responsible approach to the education and care of mentally retarded residents at Polk," she said.

Another problem at Polk, staff to patient ratio, has also been an area of constructive action. Without an increase in complement, 61 Child Care Aides have been hired, an additional ten full-time Registered Nurses were recruited. Pediatric Residents from Childrens Hospital in Pittsburgh have been recruited through the Western Regional Office of



the Department of Public Welfare to do physical examinations on Polk residents. With the assistance of a Nursing Consultant from Pittsburgh, an attempt is being made to develop better nursing coverage through the daylight and evening hours within every residential unit utilizing existing staff. By September, additional special education teachers will insure the implementation of the Right to Education at Polk. Through the cooperation of the Intermediate Unit, all residents between the ages of 5 through 21, regardless of the severity of their handicap, will receive the benefit of an educational program at the Institution geared to their specific needs.

"There are no longer cages or playpens at Polk. That option to control behavior no longer exists, so other options have to be developed, tried. Yes, it's hard on the staff, but this is a staff that is willing, hard working, and cooperative. In the very near future, a program will be developed utilizing our Psychiatric Consultants. This 'Behavior Clinic' will be developed, with the participation of staff, to provide programs and techniques specifically designed to eliminate severe negative behavior. Each resident with a severe behavior problem will be examined by the Psychiatric Consultants, and his problems and behavior discussed with personnel who work with the patient on the wards. This kind of 'what-to-do' approach, where staff can discuss problems with an expert should go a long way toward eliminating the need for restraints, drugs, or isolation as an approach to a person with behavior problems," said Mr. Colombatto.

There are no more bars on the windows of Cottage 1 at Polk. Brightly-colored red couches now brighten the day room at the cottage, and through the open doors, staff members from the education department, social service department, recreation department enter and leave with residents

on their way to training, educational, or recreational programs. "There are a great many talented staff at Polk," Joseph Colombatto recently reported, "with many exciting ideas which will be utilized. I am extremely optimistic that the progress made at Polk during the past seven weeks will continue to develop and make Polk a very relevant institution within the total framework of mental retardation services within this region."