

MENTAL PATIENT CIVIL LIBERTIES PROJECT

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LOCAL MENTAL HEALTH LAWYER SUPPORTS WOHLGEMUTH FIRING OF POLK INSTITUTION
SUPERINTENDENT BUT ATTACKS USE OF SECLUSION AND RESTRAINTS IN LOCAL
HOSPITALS

David Ferleger, Esq., Director of the Mental Patient Civil Liberties Project, a Philadelphia organization doing legal and advocacy services for mental patients, today expressed full support of Helene Wohlgemuth, Secretary of Public Welfare, in her decision to fire the superintendent of the Polk State School and Hospital for maintaining "cages" in which patients were kept.

"Such degradation of fellow human beings by institutional administrators is indefensible, both morally and legally. This practice demonstrates, in a concrete and tragic way, the almost total powerlessness of inmates in such facilities," Mr. Ferleger stated.

Mr. Ferleger explained that similar, though less blatant, abuses exist here in the Philadelphia area. Local mental hospitals use "seclusion" rooms and mechanical restraints for the control of alleged "management" problems. Seclusion is a euphemism for solitary confinement, Mr. Ferleger said. "These small locked rooms have no furniture except a pad or bare mattress on the floor; the floor and walls are cold and tiled. Access to a toilet depends upon the discretion of attendants."

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Despite official policies which would permit patients to be secluded or restrained only upon order of a doctor, Mr. Ferleger states that his observations have led him to conclude that policy is often violated.

"Seclusion is used for punishment and to get an annoying patient out of the hair of already-overworked attendants," the attorney declares. A psychiatrist has stated to Mr. Ferleger that, "Many patients will settle down if you talk to them." However, most staff are too ready-- some even anxious-- to lock the patient up, Mr. Ferleger claims.

"Perhaps the cages at Polk are even more humane than the out-of-the-way seclusion used in our local hospitals; at least the patients there could speak with and see other human beings. In seclusion, one is cut off completely from one's fellow patients. I know of one case in which a patient was locked away in seclusion for most of five days although she was a voluntary patient theoretically free to leave upon request," Mr. Ferleger commented.

Mr. Ferleger called for a complete review and survey of all state mental institutions for abuses of patient rights. Only in this way, he contends, will the citizens of the Commonwealth be assured that these violations of legal and human rights are curtailed and eliminated.