

May 7, 1973

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DEPUTY SECRETARY
MENTAL RETARDATION
MINISTER OF HEALTH
ONTARIO

Mr. Mel Knowlton,
Community Residential Services Consultant
Office of Mental Retardation
Commonwealth of Pennsylvania
Department of Public Welfare
Harrisburg, Penn.
17120

Dear Mel:

Various news items about the recent events at Polk have come to my attention. I must say that I am not at all surprised about some of the dehumanizing conditions, since at an earlier meeting with Dr. McLellan (5/19-21, 1970), his dehumanizing attitudes towards retarded individuals were openly expressed, and were at that time openly so labelled and pointed to by myself. I believe that an audio recording of this interchange was made, and may still exist in the files of your department.

I was particularly shocked at the attitude that a retarded person who has speech and can acknowledge the fact that he has throttled a fellow resident should be considered as being totally incapable of understanding the nature of his act. This type of attitude merely underlines the totally dehumanizing and infantilizing expectations held by the superintendent.

Protest by many individuals on behalf of Dr. McLellan is a consistent expression of a phenomenon apparent across the country when attempts at reform are made, and when those who are closely identified with the dehumanizing past see themselves threatened.

Also, we must be aware of the fact that when retarded persons, or for that matter any persons, are not viewed or treated with dignity or respect, their behavior almost inevitably deteriorates and becomes what the dehumanizers expected it to be. Thus, while outbursts such as documented in the news accounts are very real, I also believe firmly that much of this behavior is the outcome of unconscious shaping, and would occur much less frequently and with reduced intensity in a normalized setting. The shortage of staff is hardly an excuse for such inappropriate management, since the staff ratio as well as the per diem expenditure at Polk are as high as in other settings which do not need extraordinary restraints.

There are other institutions with a similar per diem expenditure in a similar type of economic setting which do not find the forms of physical and medical constraint as necessary as have the staff at Polk. In fact, there are institutions which never use seclusion, and which do not even possess straight jackets any more.

Also, I wish to draw your attention to the possibility that there will indeed be periods of intensified unrest among the residents at Polk, since staff members committed to a dehumanizing approach are apt, consciously or unconsciously, to make a point of proving their point.

Also, the reaction of the trustees is to be expected, since they must have been aware of the conditions at Polk and yet apparently have not publicly taken a stand on behalf of more humanized approaches in the past. Thus, they have themselves to protect.

I was particularly saddened to hear of the support given to present institution practices by some parents and associations, including not only some of our own ARC units but also UCP, Easter Seal, and March of Dime units, which merely shows that collective and corporate advocacy cannot always replace individual advocacy whereby each impaired individual is represented by one single other individual in a one-to-one relationship, with the relationship being of such a nature that no conflicts of interest are likely to be present, as is sometimes the case with parents.

If controversy should continue in regard to the appropriateness of the action of your Department, I recommend that an outside evaluation team be invited and possibly that they might apply the recently developed PASS technique to assess the appropriateness of practices at Polk. This technique consists of an instrument which quantifies certain aspects of the treatment and management environment, and which yields a score which to a large degree reflects conformity of a service with the most modern human service ideologies.

I was moved when I noticed that in some of the news accounts I read, the story of Polk was right next to news items about Watergate. If we cannot institute humane treatment practices on a face-to-face level between each other (and the retarded are part of our each other), then how should we expect integrity when highly abstract forms of morality are involved, as in the Watergate case? Or, to look at it in another way, it is odd that people should defend cages which are 5x5x5 feet in dimension, but then should protest about the placement of our prisoners in similar cages in North Viet Nam.

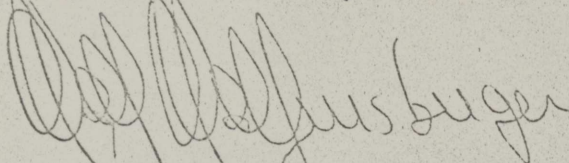
Mr. Mel Knowlton

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secretary Wohlgemuth is to be commended for her courage,
and the Governor's Office is to be saluted for supporting her
when alternative courses of action might have been politically
more expedient.

With best wishes,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read "Wolf Wolfensberger". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Wolf" being more prominent and stylized.

Wolf Wolfensberger
Visiting Scholar

WW/it