



LEFT OUT

NSW NGO MENTAL HEALTH CONFERENCE 1/3/07

Recognition of consumers in the theme “Count me in” is excellent. However we are in danger of looking at the micro level of service delivery and not directing our attention to the larger picture of public policy towards the mentally ill. We need to confront and require change of Government policies that cause mental illness, and take principled stands as an NGO conference to lessen the damage. This can't be left to funded organisations, families or patients.

There is a group totally unrepresented here. Left out. And yet they are the group most isolated from social support - 9,500 men and women in NSW.

Exclusion of the mentally ill is most starkly expressed in the government policy for expansion of the prison system; stigmatising the people held there and the blocking of community support for them. NSW prison authorities admit that 90% of women prisoners and 78% of men have had some psychiatric disorder in the year before reception.

Prisons have become the defacto mental institutions. We have no choice but to focus on their use as they are entirely controlled by government policy, drain almost \$1 billion yearly from other services, actually exacerbate mental problems, and yet are expanding out of control.

Closing mental hospitals without resources in the community has meant that those patients are now in prisons, unsupported and criminalised. Their entitlement to focus on health care has been replaced by security. Their voices and rights have been removed. Australia wide, from 30,000 in the 1960's there are now 8,000 mental health patients. Prisoner numbers have doubled in the last decade alone.

To move from punishment to proven community programs like restorative justice and mentoring means we are attacking the issue at its core, freeing people and money to support them. Prisoners and their families want to participate but are being blocked.

Imprisonment causes mental illness

Defining mentally ill people as “criminal” means they are easier to manage. As guilty people their status is like “slave” with no respect given for their rights or their families. This destroys self esteem, isolating them in cells for most of their days.

The removal of the **Emu Plains Women's Prison** all day visits shows what happens in practice. The protest went to Parliament five times last year. It got support from the Minister for Women Sandra Nori, Clover Moore, Meredith Burgmann and many other significant people. The change reduced children's access to their imprisoned mothers from all day, to two hours. And it was done as being good for the children and the mothers! With over 50% of the women being sole carers, the mental anguish was enormous. The rate of mental health disorders for children of prisoners is six times average. Despite overwhelming opposition the change remains with many children now not seeing their mothers at all.

When the mothers called for support, community groups became involved. The prisons department openly threatened the prisoners. Several visitors were banned, one for several years, for discussing the matter with each other, a women was removed from the Womens Advisory Council for taking it up, and an organisation with twenty two years standing as a “Community Service Order” agency was removed.

Prisons are not subject to community overview. When a new women's prison was proposed a few years ago, 127 submissions were received by a Parliamentary Inquiry. Only one submission supported the building – the prisons department itself. And it got built.

Getting worse

The federal right to vote was removed some months ago. The right to preserve sperm and eggs for cancer patients convicted of serious offences was removed by Parliament but not made law. Scott Simpson and Corey Brough cases.

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