

Asylums and Human Rights

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Invited Response to JAMA Viewpoint | January 20, 2015 :
"Improving Long-term Psychiatric Care: Bring Back the Asylum".
JAMA. 2015;313(3):243-244. doi:10.1001/jama.2014.16088.

In a JAMA Viewpoint, Dr. Sisti and colleagues recognize that the deinstitutionalization process in the United States has failed to deliver appropriate community-based support and services for people with mental illness. They rightly worry that emergency rooms and prisons are filling the gap. However, they are wrong to suggest we should "bring back the asylum."

Reviving asylums would violate the human rights of the very people whose circumstance the authors seek to improve. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities mandates the right of all people to live in the community rather than endure segregation in institutions. The convention embraces an understanding of disability in which the needs and wishes of the individual are put first. Most countries globally have signed the CRPD, and many of those have also ratified it, including the European Union. The United States lags behind in living up to its obligations to respect the rights of people with mental illness, but this is not an excuse to abandon them. That much of the deinstitutionalization of psychiatric hospitals in the United States meant simply shutting their doors is at the very heart of the problem. 'Opening the back door' is not what is meant by deinstitutionalization. Responsibly implemented, deinstitutionalization involves downsizing, and eventually closing, long-term inpatient facilities while *concurrently* developing community-based alternatives that meet people's actual needs and supports them to succeed in the community.

The authors make the argument that community-based support is not for everyone: 'Even well-designed community-based programs are often inadequate for a segment of patients who have been deinstitutionalized. For severely and chronically mentally ill persons, the optimal option is long-term care in a psychiatric hospital. This is a myth. There is significant evidence that if people with severe and chronic mental illness receive appropriate support in housing and employment they can thrive in the community and enjoy their human right to do so. I have often seen people who were labeled hopeless and needing to be confined in an institution regain their humanity when they are deinstitutionalized, move to the community and get the support they need.

The authors' suggestion to establish 'humane asylums' where people can heal is a mission impossible because it is misguided. It disregards the well-known fact that asylums and similar long-stay large residential institutions have totally failed in their mandate to rehabilitate people. Pumping millions of dollars into brand new, extremely costly institutions will end in the same failure. An institution can be made more comfortable with things like private rooms, but it can never offer people freedom and participation in society.

Reviving mental asylums would not only take us back to the past, to a system that we know is a total failure, it also gives up on continuing to develop quality, person-centered community-based services, an effort that has not been tried nearly as hard or as thoroughly as it could, and indeed should be.

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