



Mental Health Association of Portland

*A volunteer nonprofit organization
helping people in recovery from
mental illness and addiction
speak up and speak out*

AN UNNECESSARY HOSPITAL

An open letter to Oregon Governor John Kitzhaber
October 6, 2011

Dear Governor Kitzhaber,

The Mental Health Association of Portland is Oregon's leading public advocate for persons with a diagnosis of mental illness. We mean to stop discrimination in Oregon.

Today, mental illness is Ground Zero of the civil rights struggle. Persons with mental illness are the most discriminated against group in Oregon and throughout society. We are routinely treated with contempt and excluded from participation, an invisible subclass whose rights and freedoms are sparingly parceled out and capriciously withdrawn.

We encounter discrimination in all areas of life, including housing, employment, insurance, health care, educational institutions, the justice system, the military and the media. Many of us live in abject poverty or in restricted environments. We even die prematurely, an average of 15 years sooner than people without mental illness. But the clearest reminder of our status can be seen in the shadow of large, locked buildings, the so-called "mental hospitals."

Our group has been a longstanding critic of the Oregon State Hospital, and of incarcerating persons due to mental illness.

We OPPOSE any further development of a public psychiatric hospital at Junction City.

We urge you to withdraw your endorsement, and to direct the project's budget toward effective community-based treatment that will actually benefit us.

The Junction City project is a high-priced offense to logic and conscience, a luxury our community neither needs nor wants. Especially after renovating and expanding the Oregon State Hospital facilities in Salem,

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building a new hospital would represent a financial and clinical commitment to the same regressive "lock-'em-up" model of care Oregon has supported for over 150 years -- and worse, continue this disgrace into the next 150.

The inadequacies of the community mental health system do not justify starving it further. Putting money into segregated care takes dollars away from the few, underfunded community resources we have, while creating excuses to spend even less in the future: "We gave at the (Junction City) office."

And let's be clear: a new hospital is not some sort of necessary "transitional" step on the road to community care. Transition implies movement, not stasis, and certainly not entrenchment. Investing in a new psychiatric institution can be called "transitional" only in the manner that investing in new deck chairs transitions you off the Titanic.

Over a decade ago, the Supreme Court's Olmstead decision affirmed that unjustified institutional isolation of persons with mental illness is a form of discrimination; it further mandated that states provide care in the least restrictive setting possible. Oregon's response plan pledges development of "a robustly funded community-based system of care." That's an empty promise if money is flowing away from community treatment and toward more big-box lockups.

Recovery from mental illness isn't just a set of solitary tasks for a individual to take. It's a constellation of clinical tools, vocational options, and spiritual directions made available to an impaired individual. These tools, options, and directions have no set script - and that is entirely their strength. Owning our illness gets us and keeps us well.

Study after study shows persons sick with mental illness recuperate and recover when friends and family are engaged with their treatment and care. In this light, there could hardly be a worse location in Oregon than Junction City for a psychiatric hospital.

Last we counted, Junction City had one stoplight. Its social infrastructure does not have and cannot sustain the array of external supports needed for recovery from mental illness -- churches, libraries, 12-Step meetings, parks, schools, bookstores. Since the town is not served by buses or trains, the only visitors would be those who have cars, essentially excluding many patients' families and friends, and virtually guaranteeing no new friendships. Junction City also lacks sufficient opportunities for competitive employment. For many of us, worthwhile work -- not weaving baskets or hammering furniture -- is central to the chance of recovery. In Junction City, that can't happen.

We would oppose the Junction City hospital even if it were a bargain. Cheap discrimination is still discrimination. But given the recession,

we can't ignore the cost -- neither can you.

Perhaps in better times, it wouldn't matter so much if you threw our money at a few bad choices along with the good ones. It matters a great deal now, and every dollar you put into the Junction City hospital is a dollar you can't put elsewhere.

On a cost basis alone, community-based care is the wise choice. On any other basis -- our rights, our recovery, or simply "do unto others" -- community-based treatment is wiser still.

Governor, there is no soft middle ground here. Any support for the Junction City hospital is opposition to our community. Your record is one of strong leadership in health care policy and equal rights for all Oregonians. We stand united against this hospital, and we ask you to stand with us now, to take action, to change your mind.

Yours truly,

Board members of the Mental Health Association of Portland

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