Consolidating Historical Perspectives: Maine Institutions For People with Developmental Disabilities

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Abstract

Throughout America’s storied history there have been many highs and many lows. Perhaps one of the darkest time periods, in terms of disabilities in the United States, was it’s prevailing thoughts to categorize individuals, separate them from their families and their communities and place them into institutions. Many people with disabilities that were living in the institutions were not only abused, but were living in bad conditions as well.

This poster will describe my work in assisting the Community Housing of Maine (CHOM) in revising and combining two separate presentations on the history of supports for people with developmental disabilities in Maine. CHOM’s mission will be illustrated in the project. The process of combining multiple presentations into one document and highlighting the important themes will be described as well. The poster will display pictures illustrating the treatment of individuals with disabilities throughout America’s history, as well as some portraying the mistreatment of the people at Pineland. The pictures will also illustrate the information on the document that was created as part of the Maine Coalition for Housing and Quality Services.

Sadly, Maine is no exception to this tragic time in American lore. Pineland was one such example in which many people were both harmed as well as being treated badly and unfairly. One of the best quotations ever is: “Those who do not remember the past are condemned to repeat it.” by George Santayana. Later in history, this quote was rephrased by the late Winston Churchill as, “Those who fail to learn from history are condemned to repeat it.”

Purpose of the History Project

1. To create and revise a Maine Coalition for Housing and Quality Services document on the history of supports for people with developmental disabilities in Maine.
2. Combine previous presentations developed by the late Charlene Kninelly and Skip McGowan into a single workable document.
3. Research additional information about the history of community supports including the evolution of supports in the 21st century.
4. Work with CHOM staff and LEND mentor to refine the outline and presentation.
5. Create final document to submit for approval for use by CHOM in future presentations.

Outline of Final Narrative

Prior to the 20th Century
  • Short life spans, generally.
  • Often cared for by relatives on family farms.
1900s to 1920s
  • Maine legislation for “Feeble Minded” enacted.
  • Pineland opens in 1908.
  • Initially – training and support to become self-supporting.
  • Many Pineland residents work on farm to offset cost of care.
  • Rapidly growing population at Pineland ~ 700 people by 1925.
  • Belief that people needed to be separated and live with people “of their own kind” became prevalent after 1922.
1930s
  • People classified as “high grades” and “low grades.”
  • Eugenics movement, view of people with disabilities as a menace, and forced sterilization.
  • Depression put financial pressures on families forcing more institutionalization.
1940s
  • World War II also put financial pressures on families.
  • Effort to prepare people to work or live in community went away.
1950s
  • Pineland population reaches its max. as medical community supports institutions.
  • Community services in Maine began.
1960s and 70s
  • Federal funding for DD services under Kennedy administration.
  • With parent advocacy, societal attitudes begin to change, including belief that government had obligation to care for people.
  • Media exposes in Maine and U.S. result in movement to improve institutions.
  • First lawsuit in Maine in 1975 leads to Consent Decree in 1978.
  • 1975 – Federal legislation guarantees the right of ALL children to education.
1980s and 1990s
  • Push for deinstitutionalization and decline in Pineland population.
  • Pineland closes in 1996 and Maine becomes 5th state to end institutionalization.
21st Century
  • General belief that people should be included in their communities.
  • 2010 – Maine released from consent decree.
  • New options for community supports are explored.