

A small step toward equality

Ontario to provide legal aid for mentally ill

By JOHN MANSFIELD

A one-year pilot project designed to place legal-aid lawyers in each of Ontario's 14 psychiatric hospital clinics was unveiled recently by J. B. Allen, assistant director of legal aid for Ontario.

The programme, which excludes psychiatric wards in public hospitals and ex-patient boarding homes, is intended to provide easy access for patients to legal aid already available through normal channels.

Although the programme is on a voluntary basis, and lawyers are not pressed into counselling, Allen claims the response from local lawyers has been a good one.

Lawyers considered for the programme must have expertise in the field concerning which they give advice, and must be able to adjust to

conditions such as the setting of the mental clinics, and the programme's legislation.

The executive director of the Psychiatric Hospital Patients Welfare Associations (PHPWA), G. Tori Salter, who enthusiastically applauded the programme as possibly the first of its kind anywhere, said that lawyers chosen "must have a disposition for this kind of work".

She added that it was important for the lawyers to become acquainted with the "politics of the poor" and to learn "how to deal with the normal conditions under which the poor live." Under the plan, it is up to the lawyer to determine whether or not the patient has a legitimate case.

According to the plan, the patient would have the option of seeking aid from either the hospital lawyer or a lawyer of his choice.

Asked if there would be any pre-screening procedure by the hospital staff, Allen said the programme was designed to provide a "direct line" route for the patient, with no staff interventions.

Salter said that although the legal aid programme is the end product of



many years of digging by the PHPWA, in reality it is a small step in the group's attempt to arrange equal treatment for the mentally ill in Ontario hospitals.

She said the the new legal aid clinics will help to alleviate the social pressures brought to bear on

the mental patient.

Posters and signs have been placed in each participating institution informing the patient of the programme, his rights under the programme, and locations in his building where counselling can be obtained.

Hellenic meeting

The Hellenic Student Association will meet today at 3 p.m. in N102 Ross. All interested parties are invited to attend.

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Psychiatric official charges mistreatment of ex-patients

Many of Toronto's numerous boarding homes for ex-patients of psychiatric hospitals are consciously used by hospital administrators to house patients who in their estimation can be helped no further, and most of the homes are not approved by the provincial government and contain no supervision, rehabilitation programme or qualified personnel. G. Tori Salter, executive director of the Psychiatric Hospital Patients Welfare Association (PHPWA) charged recently.

The situation has been brought to the attention of Ontario health minister Frank Miller, as well as that of the director of Ontario's psychiatric branch. While no official response has been received from Miller, the branch director has stopped the movement of mental patients from both the 999 Queen St. and Lakeshore institutions in the interim.

Although the provincial government provides approved boarding homes, generally only those patients who have the greatest chance of returning to society are sent to these homes.

Unauthorized homes are on the increase in the Toronto area, said Salter, and all one needs to operate one is an old house near an institution. She charged that many landlords of unauthorized homes hoard the ex-patients' welfare cheques and serve food of little nutritional value. Salter said she had evidence of one case in which a female landlord had bought a farm on the cheques she had collected. Landlords have no legal responsibility to the patients.

The PHPWA is demanding an investigation into the matter, better government controls on the operation of all homes supplied by mental hospitals, and mandatory licencing of such premises.

Salter said there is always hope for the mentally ill, regardless of how hopeless it may seem, and that she is concerned about the 67 per cent rate of re-admission of patients to the Queen St. hospital.

At present, the ex-patient boarding homes neither allow visits by friends or family, nor fall under the new legal aid clinic programme designed to give legal advice to patients who want it.



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