

Winter
2010

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MENTAL HEALTH AMERICA ALLEGHENY COUNTY

Breaking the Silence

The Willard Suitcase Exhibit

Mental Health America Allegheny County (MHA) successfully showed "The Willard Suitcase Exhibit" this September at the Frick Fine Arts Gallery in Oakland. The exhibit showcased together *The Lives They Left Behind* and the *abandoned-america.org* photo collection.

We want to give a very special thank you to our supporters: The Staunton Farm Foundation, Community Care Behavioral Health, The Alliance for Infants and Toddlers, Allegheny Health-Choices, Inc., Janssen, Division of Ortho-McNeil-Janssen Pharmaceuticals, UPMC, Community Counseling Center, PA Association of Psychosocial Rehabilitation Services (PAPRS), Turtle Creek Valley MH/MR, Inc., NAMI, Milestone Center, People's Oakland, Volunteers of America and the Maurice Falk Fund.



The attic at Willard Psychiatric Center where over 200 suitcases of former patients were discovered.

We would also like to thank the collaborating organizations including the Staunton Farm Foundation, Community Care Behavioral Health, Community Health Services, the Peer Support and Advocacy Network (PSAN), the Allegheny County Coalition for Recovery (ACCR), the Allegheny County Office of Behavioral Health, the Duquesne University School of Nursing, the University of Pittsburgh's School of Art and Architecture and all of the visitors, volunteers and speakers that participated in making this event a great success.

The Lives They Left Behind, curated by Darby Penney and Peter Stasney, was inspired by the 1995 discovery of several hundred suitcases in the attic of Willard Psychiatric Center in New York. The suitcases, filled with the belongings of former patients, bear witness to the

complex lives these people led before being committed to Willard.

The traveling exhibit was created to honor the memory of nine former Willard patients, and many others like them, who were removed from their communities and institutionalized. (www.suitcaseexhibit.org)

Abandoned-america.org showcased the work of photographer matthew murray. Murray preserves the memory and history of once thriving facilities like asylums, institutions and schools by photographing these structures in their abandoned state.

With this exhibit, MHA hoped to raise awareness of the isolation and arbitrary nature of mental illness, and

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UPCOMING EVENTS

Saturday, May 21, 2011
2011 Highmark Walk for a Healthy Community
Registration: 7:45 am
5K Walk: 9:00 am
Heinz Field
Contact: Lyndsey Cowan at 412-661-7860 ext. 2018

Let Our Voices Be Heard Meetings
First Monday of Every Month
Meeting: 10:30 am to 12:00 pm
Advocacy Training: 12:30 pm to 2:00 pm
Department of Human Services
One Smithfield Street
Contact: Rachel Freund at 412-661-7860 ext. 2002

The Willard Suitcase Exhibit Continued

our efforts were generously supported through features in the local media including the Pittsburgh Post Gazette, KDKA, WDUQ, the Pittsburgh City Paper and the Pitt Chronicle.

The response was overwhelming. Visitors began blogging about the exhibit, people used Facebook to plan group visits and those who attended spread the word to friends and colleagues. Additionally, teachers and professors brought their classes and parents brought their young children. Over 2,200 visitors, some from as far as Colorado, Michigan and New York City, stopped into the gallery during the 18 day showing.

The public's reaction showed that our community was ready for an exhibit of this nature.

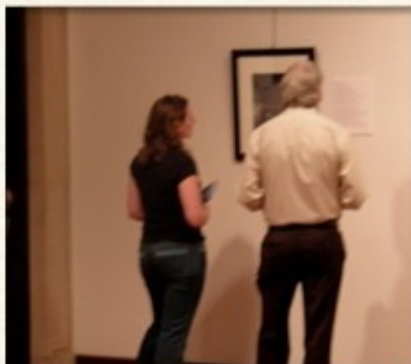
"I want to ask myself, everyone, how we allowed this to happen," wrote a visitor.

"Perhaps this will help us face something that we all fear," stated another.

This powerful exhibit started an important conversation in Pittsburgh and one that we hope will continue.

Mental Health America—Allegheny County is a tax exempt organization, declared tax exempt by the federal government (under Section 501 c 3) of the IRS Code) and the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. A copy of our official registration and financial information may be obtained from the Pennsylvania Department of State by calling (toll free from within Pennsylvania) 800-732-0999, Registration does not imply endorsement. All donations to Mental Health America —Allegheny County are tax exempt to the full extent of the law.

SNAPSHOTS FROM THE WILLARD SUITCASE EXHIBIT



Willard Suitcase
Exhibit

September 1-24, 2010





The Disability Voting Coalition

The Disability Voting Coalition of PA is a cross-disability organization focused on improving voting experiences and educating about voting rights for the nearly 2 million Pennsylvanians with disabilities (who make up 20% of potential voters). Pennsylvanians with disabilities represent one of PA's largest potential voting blocs.

Is Pennsylvania Making Sure Citizens With Disabilities Can Register?

by David Harris-Gershon

For attorney Paul O'Hanlon – Chair of the DVC Steering Committee – zero is the loneliest number. Or more accurately, the most disturbing number. And it's this number, or rather, a series of them, that is behind what could soon be a significant moment in Pennsylvania for eligible voters with disabilities.

However, in order to understand these troubling zeros, it's first necessary to give a bit of background. As explained in the October DVC newsletter, the National Voter Registration Act (NVRA) of 1993 requires that all agencies providing state-funded services offer voter registration opportunities to individuals receiving services. This law is sometimes called the Motor Voter Act because it demands that DMVs across the country offer registration opportunities to those applying for a license. But the law extends to all types of social service organizations, including all state-funded offices or agencies providing services to those with disabilities.



The National Voter Registration Act of 1993 (NVRA) stipulates that all state-funded service agencies must provide voter registration opportunities. But in Pennsylvania, is that actually happening? This is the question O'Hanlon and the DVC seek to answer.

According to O'Hanlon, state-funded disability agencies are legally required by NVRA to provide individuals with voter registration opportunities any time they apply or re-apply for benefits or services.

“The same level of service must be provided in completing the voter registration forms as the agency's own forms,” O'Hanlon recently wrote for the DVC.

But O'Hanlon doesn't think this is happening, because counties across Pennsylvania have, for years, been reporting

zero registrations from organizations that should be helping clients with disabilities register to vote, according to NVRA.

“State-funded service organizations in Pennsylvania are required, minimally, to do three things,” he told me on an unexpectedly warm October afternoon in Pittsburgh, “and one of these things is to list their agency code on registration forms so the State knows where voter registrations are coming from.”

And this is where O'Hanlon is seeing a disturbing number of zeros, as 43 counties in Pennsylvania have reported zero registrations by mental health and developmental disability service agencies for four straight years, and 55 counties have reported no registrations from school districts that are supposed to offer registration opportunities for eligible high school students receiving special education services.

The Pennsylvania Department of State is responsible for making sure that state-funded service organizations are in compliance

with NVRA. And so O'Hanlon, seeing all of the zeros being reported by Pennsylvania counties, approached the Department of State. "They admitted that the data showed zero registrations," said O'Hanlon, "but they attributed it partially to a bureaucratic issue – that organizations simply aren't putting their agency codes on registration forms."

However, when O'Hanlon and Rachel Freund of the DVC interviewed various county service agencies, none claimed to have been given direction from the Department of State regarding how to be in compliance with NVRA. Basically, they found that nobody was telling county-level organizations how to help their clients with disabilities register to vote.

"The Department of State sees compliance. But we don't see compliance," said O'Hanlon.

"The law [according to NVRA]

says *all* state-funded service organizations must be in compliance. And that word – all – is the key. In Pennsylvania, we just don't think it's happening."

But if the Department of State thinks everything is okay, and it is the only government office responsible for making sure everything is okay, one might wonder: what can be done?

O'Hanlon's move: go to the Auditor General, Jack Wagner, who in Pennsylvania is an independent official capable of reviewing the performance of government offices. "We're going to ask Jack Wagner's office to conduct a performance audit in Pennsylvania to bring clarity to whether things are as bad as they look on paper. To have counties report zero registrations year after year makes you wonder who's not doing what. And a performance audit would clarify whether or not there is NVRA compliance across Pennsylvania."

The DVC has put out a call for other organizations to join their request for a performance audit to be conducted, and so far numerous agencies have signed on, including the Disability Rights Network of Pennsylvania, Just Harvest and The Arc of Pennsylvania.

When asked if O'Hanlon was optimistic, his tone was upbeat. "I think an audit will be done, because it's appropriate to be done. And Jack [Wagner] is the type of individual who views voting as fundamentally essential. So I think there's a good chance his office will do an audit."

Asked what such an audit could do to change things, O'Hanlon offered, "It could show which side is right – it's a way to collect data to show if there is compliance. And that data, perhaps, could be enough to precipitate a change."

And a change is exactly what O'Hanlon is seeking.

For more information on the National Voter Registration Act, check out this great resource:

"The National Voter Registration Act at Fifteen" by Estelle Rogers, Esq.
available at www.projectvote.org/images/publications/NVRA/

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You have the power to
strengthen our community
– help us create a loud
political voice!

Membership is free.

Simply visit
www.dvcpa.org and scroll
down to

"Join the DVC!"

The mission of the Disability Voting Coalition of PA is to increase the power of Pennsylvanians with disabilities by establishing the disability community as a strong and mobilized voter bloc.

The DVC newsletter is designed, written and edited by David Harris-Gershon.

If you have a story from your community that you'd like to see covered or someone you'd like to see profiled in the newsletter, send suggestions to Rachel Freund, DVC Project Coordinator, at rfreund@mhaac.net.

*DVC is supported by generous funding from the PA Development Disabilities Council.
DVC is also supported by Mental Health America Allegheny County.*



ASK THE ATTORNEY

I need an attorney. Can you help?

Mental Health America Legal Services provides legal counseling and/or representation to those who are both impoverished and mental health consumers.

What type of cases do you do?

MHALS handles civil matters such as issues of child custody or support, debt relief, landlord/tenant disputes, and S.S.I./S.S.D.

What if I have a criminal matter?

You would be counseled, based on your financial history, to contact either a criminal defense attorney or the Office of the Public Defender. In Allegheny County, this number is 412-350-2401.

What if I want to appeal a Mental Health Commitment?

You would be counseled to contact the Office of the Public Defender.

If I file bankruptcy will bill collectors stop calling?

Yes. An automatic stay prevents bill collectors from taking any action to collect debts.

Should I file for bankruptcy?

It would depend on the reason you want to file. If you are behind on mortgage or loan payments, bankruptcy may not be the right choice for you. It would not eliminate the right of either creditor to take your property to cover your debt.

Mental Health America Legal Service (MHALS) provides legal consultation and representation on civil matters for individuals receiving care from the community mental health system

**412-661-7860 ext. 2012
fcecchetti@mhaac.net**

MEET THE STAFF



On October 1, Meredith Blackman joined the MHA team as an Adult Mental Health Advocate. In this role, Meredith provides advocacy services for individuals in the Acute Community Support Plan (ACSP) and the Community Support Plan (CSP) processes who have complex mental health needs and are currently experiencing psychiatric hospitalization. She ensures that consumer voice and choice is heard and recovery principles are honored throughout these processes.

New Advocate: Meredith Blackman

Paying attention to consumer voice and choice is a valuable and necessary piece of the recovery process for individuals, and Meredith feels that the role of the mental health advocate is essential in providing this kind of support. Her primary goal in her work as an adult mental health advocate is to help consumers accomplish their goals in a setting that achieves their individual idea of recovery.

Meredith, a Lansing, MI native, completed her undergraduate degree in Psychology from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (UIUC). While enrolled in a Social Justice course at UIUC, she was inspired to follow a career path where she could help individuals solve problems from a systemic approach rather than a diagnostic one. She then went on to complete a master's degree in Social Service Administration at the University of Chicago and is now a Licensed Social Worker.

Before joining MHA, Meredith completed a year-long internship in Columbia College's counseling office providing therapy to college students. She also worked as a service coordinator at a drop-in center for homeless women in Chicago.

In her spare time, Meredith enjoys cooking and running. Having recently moved to Pittsburgh, she also enjoys exploring what her new home has to offer. The city's greatest surprises to her thus far? The Strip District and Primanti's sandwiches.



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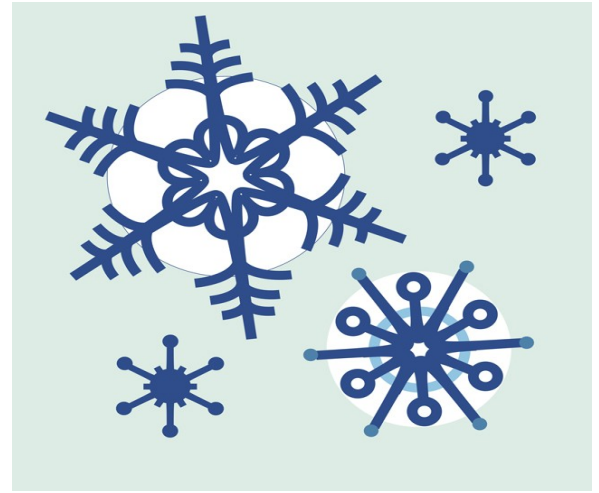
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**Happy Holidays
 from MHA!**

Mental Health America Allegheny County provides programs and services that support the health of mind and body and works to eliminate the stigma of mental illness and addiction for all.



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