

## Education and Awareness of People with Disabilities

By: Robert Stack

Recently, the chief of staff to the President of the United States lacking the vocabulary to describe his enigmatic feelings reacted with the phrase “that’s f’ing retarded.” I believe that Mr. Emanuel meant to say that is stupid. He obviously doesn’t know that retarded (as it was historically referenced) and stupid can be antinomies. This term, like the N word pretty much became unacceptable. Civil society realizes that labeling oppressed people is one more added ingredient to oppressing them either in slavery or captivity.

While the plight of the African American is taught in a myriad of Universities, the repression of people with disabilities (the retarded) was and continues to be hidden from the general public and essentially placed on the back burner in so many ways. It is know for example that there are others who suffer even more diabolical abuse; yet they have done nothing against society. They are statistically the most vulnerable, most abused, and most systemically tortured group of people in the United States. They are the 52,000 people with mental retardation relegated to live in institutions.

Five thousand individuals live in thirteen institutions in Texas; 15,000 more live in institutions in New Jersey, New York, Connecticut, Pennsylvania, Virginia, California, Mississippi, and North Carolina. These are states that have documented rapes (including pregnancies), beatings, and murders, investigated and confirmed by the United States Department of Justice.

When I managed 10 of these facilities in New Jersey, I encountered a girl who was profoundly mentally retarded (IQ less than 20), non-verbal, blind, and in a wheel chair. She lived in an all-female institution, yet somehow became pregnant. Suspiciously, most of the staff were male. Her disabilities left her unable to comprehend the atrocities committed against her or to reach out for help.

During this time, I gave a tour of the same facility to a local state Assemblyman (now a United States Congressman). I vividly remember that one of his staff gave a blood-curdling scream at the site of a naked woman on a bed with her arms, legs, and neck tied up in rags. The reason for this degrading mistreatment: she threw her lunch across the cafeteria. The amount of time she was like this? No one knew. It could have been a few hours or maybe a few days. She had absolutely no concept of why she was tied up. No one was developing the “behavior modification” plan that we learned about in psychology class; she was just being punished.

Last year in Texas, videos were discovered at a Corpus Christi institution of staff members provoking higher functioning people with mental retardation (IQ 75) to fight one another for “entertainment” purposes. These “fight clubs” are just another example of the failure of institutions to adequately care for this vulnerable population.

So how does the Department of Justice respond? They “threaten” to cut off needed Medicaid dollars to the states. The states and the Department of Justice then settle on reducing the number of people that should live in the institutions, knowing that a large, state-run facility is difficult to manage. They agree on the number of people with disabilities that will be placed in small

community based facilities (there are over 50,000 homes nationwide). In fact, many states (such as Minnesota, Vermont, Hawaii) no longer operate large institutions for persons with disabilities. Michigan will close their last one this year.

Many people ask, “Can we afford to close institutions?” After discussing this with Secretary Sebelius, I sent her a small position paper that showed the cost-benefits of reducing the number of individuals in state institutions. The average cost of a community-based program is about \$80,000 per person per year; in a large institution, it is over \$250,000 per person per year. If the federal government would push states to place 50% of those living in institutions into community-based programs, they would save over \$1 billion per year. It is morally and ethically wrong to incarcerate people who have done nothing wrong against society and are not a danger to others. In other words, it is stupid.

During the last few months, I was a member of New Jersey Governor Christie’s transition team. We recommended that we close two of New Jersey’s seven institutions, saving \$90 million a year. We were conservative in our suggestions, because if he closed four institutions, it would save close to \$200 million per year and still leave 1,000 people still in these facilities. This would also save the federal match an additional \$200 million. The closed institutions could be retrofitted to accommodate prison overcrowding or renovated and put to other uses.

When people are placed into the community, they live a fulfilling life with dignity, respect, and self-determination. They find voices from small private non-profit and other public sector venues, allowing them to develop meaningful relationships, contribute to their communities, build self-esteem, and enjoy new experiences.

My friend Bernard lived in an institution for over twenty years. That institution was closed 17 years ago. Plans were underway to place him into another institution, one that was cited by the Department of Justice for neglect and abuse in New Jersey. However, we managed to bring him into community-based programs instead. Bernard is labeled mentally retarded and is blind, but for the past 10 years, he has lived in a condo that he owns in New Jersey. He has a full time job and pays taxes. I once asked him, “Were you ever tortured or hurt in the institution?” Bernard replied, “No...but I really hated taking ice cold showers with a lot of other people. It is nice to listen to music, have a machine read me the newspaper, and most of all have a job, take the bus to work, and have friends.”

We need to reduce these facilities. Government can do it. It doesn’t cost money. The movement needs leadership. Bernard may be labeled clinically as “retarded” but he is far from stupid.

