

The Day

Leading The Way To Keep Mentally Ill Out Of Nursing Homes

By Robert E. Davidson, Ph.D.

March 30, 2009

I was dismayed at the sensational headline stating "Mentally ill a threat in nursing homes," published March 23 on page 1 of The Day. It seemed to blame all people with mental illness for the actions of a few elsewhere. Our problem is slightly different.

Many places put people with mental illnesses in nursing homes because they can't serve people in the community. Those people placed in nursing homes stay forever because no one knows how to get them out. Nursing homes often do not know about psychosocial rehabilitation, so the patients get medication and nothing else. People are blamed for displaying symptoms that could be controlled by better treatment. They are too symptomatic for discharge, but their situation makes them worse.

The Connecticut system also needs more capacity, but it actively encourages agencies to work together to plug the cracks that clients fall into. It is certainly not perfect, and we have too many people in nursing homes too, but we are working to get them out. And we know how. We recently got federal money for this purpose, but the program arranged community services for 40 people before the money arrived.

That says that the Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services is serious about this - but also that we had so many people in nursing homes unnecessarily that we could get some out without extra resources.

In a study released recently, the National Alliance on Mental Illness rated Connecticut as the best mental health system in the country, but the grade was only a "B." The national average was a "D."

The National Alliance on Mental Illness praised our innovative programs and attitudes, but complained that we still had too many people in institutions.

The biggest bottleneck is a state Medicaid policy that costs more in the long run - in part by keeping people in nursing homes who don't need to be there.