

# A plea for mental health rights

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MARLBOROUGH – The state Department of Mental Health hosted a conference yesterday to explore various facets of a charged issue: human rights for people with mental illnesses.

The tone was set early on by Patricia E. Deegan, Ph.D., director of ex-patient studies at Boston University and a former psychiatric patient herself.

Deegan's keynote speech outlined 150 years of patients who have used different

## Conference hears impassioned stories of people who have battled illnesses

forms of resistance to fight for their basic human rights. These include everything from breaking out of mental institutions to organized resistance against physical abuse and restraint.

Deegan ended her speech with an impassioned plea to consumers and ex-patients everywhere: "Take courage; we

have resiliency," Deegan said. "They have locked us in dungeons and chained us to the wall. We have not been silenced. We continue to say that we are human beings. ... We have marched on Washington and on the Massachusetts State House, and we will not stop marching until every DMH employee accords us

our inviolable human rights."

On hand were DMH executives and other agency employees, who help set statewide policy, as well as psychiatric doctors and nurses and others on the front lines of treatment. Also in attendance were the patients themselves, known in current parlance as mental health consumers.

Deegan's speech chronicled early acts of resistance. These included a 1710 inmate in a mental institution flinging the MENTAL HEALTH, Page B2

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contents of his chamber pot at someone who was gawking at him through a window, as well as the exploits of Ebenezer Haskell, an escape artist in a Philadelphia institution who finally was accorded his day in court and found to be quite sane. He later wrote a book about his experience.

Deegan made the point that although patients in modern times do have the rights to receive and write private letters and to have visitors – which was not always the case – there are still issues to be fought. She showed TV footage of a February 2001 protest at Tewksbury Hospital, where patients – some with mental illnesses, some with other health concerns – protested about the dirty bathrooms and generally poor facilities

in the hospital.

Others at the conference in the Royal Plaza Hotel talked about the use of restraints on patients, as well as sometimes being forced to take medicine against their wills.

For its part, the DMH continues to work for the human rights of all patients, and particularly for children in the mental-health system, said DMH Commissioner Marylou Sudders. Among the agency's initiatives are looking at eliminating or reducing the use of restraints for children, as well as an "in-depth" human rights training program for DMH employees.

One project has a video being produced by the adolescents in DMH care explaining the rights of children and adolescents in language they are able to understand. There is also an office of human

rights within DMH, staffed by several dozen full- and part-time employees.

Several patients at the conference shared heart-rending stories of being traumatized by early childhood sexual abuse, among other acts of violence against them, with the results being mental illness and substance-abuse.

Some of them have started self-help groups called Women Embracing Life and Living (WELL). Rather than replacing therapy, these groups are akin to AA, but for women who deal with several disorders simultaneously.

Said one woman who did not want her name used: "My mental illness is part of who I am. It will always be part of me. But I don't let it stop me – I'm quite active in the community. I am a survivor."

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