



Made in Missouri: The Community Mental Health Movement and Community Mental Health Centers 1963-2003

Paul R. Ahr

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Fifty years ago, ordinary Americans with a serious and persistent mental illness could look forward to a life of marginally effective treatment in antiquated, overcrowded and poorly staffed mental institutions. Midway through the 1950s, the census at these institutions exceeded 560,000 Americans, a fact that alarmed mental health professionals and public officials to the highest levels of the federal government. In 1963, President John F. Kennedy proposed to Congress a "bold new approach" to addressing this situation, pointing out that it was tolerated far too long, and "has troubled our national conscience -- but only as a problem unpleasant to mention, easy to postpone, and despairing of solution." Congress responded with legislation establishing locally-based comprehensive community mental health centers (CMHCs). Over the next two decades, more than 700 CMHCs were established nationwide. Missouri -- an innovator in the area of high quality community-based mental health services -- was quick to respond to President Kennedy's call for action. In the intervening years, the CMHCs in Missouri have been challenged by reductions in inpatient mental health services, threatened by subordination to managed care companies, and limited by severe and recurring budget cuts. Buoyed by the support of their communities and the dedication of their board and staff members, and guided by their uncompromising concern for persons with a mental illness, they have stayed the course.

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