

Some People just don't get it
By Harry Wolbert

When it comes to the topic of deinstitutionalization some people just don't 'get it'. This is a question that I have often asked myself and wondered why. Maybe you have too.

Well I do get it! I remember a time in my life when I was institutionalized and denied my rights as a full citizen of this great country. So I know what I am talking about. What is it like being locked up and institutionalized? Many of the rights and freedoms which I enjoy today were taken away. I was stripped of my privacy, the right to make 'choices' or have any sense of control over my life. Some of the same fears, prejudices and attitudes toward persons with disabilities which were so prevalent back then are still around today.

When addressing the whole issue of deinstitutionalization we need to ask ourselves two questions that are at the very heart of the issue. They are 'whose life is it?' and 'who should have the power and control over that life?' How we answer these questions will determine which side of the fence we are on. Should it be the state? Non-government agencies? An individual's natural family? Or should it be the individual himself who determines the course and direction of his life?

More often than not money (or a lack thereof) seems to be one of the major stumbling blocks to achieving our goal of full citizenship for persons labeled with a disability. But is money the real issue? In my opinion it is not, nor should it be. After all the government of Manitoba was able to find 40 million dollars which it plans to put toward the upgrade of the Manitoba Developmental Centre located in Portage La Prairie. Why? In a day and age where we've closed down all of our orphanages and residential schools this government continues to find and support an outdated system of care that other states and provinces (like Newfoundland and British Columbia) have now rejected too.

What will it take to get through to these individuals? It won't be easy. First we need to make it clear that we aren't going to go away. We will not rest until the Manitoba Developmental Centre and every institution like it is closed down. Permanently! Governments come and go. Whether it's this government that does it or some future government we must never lose sight of our ultimate goal. That all persons labeled with a disability have the opportunity to live in the community as full citizens. Nothing less!

A final word to our elected officials. Enough is enough! It's time to walk the talk. There are some really good policy papers (and studies to back them up) out there. We've also heard some inspiring messages on inclusion and full citizenship. These words need to be backed up with action and adequate funding. No more empty promises. The time to act is now!