

L'abri en ville

Shelter in the city

The deinstitutionalisation of mental patients in the United States and Canada has quite a long history by now. Keeping these patients locked up and cared for around the clock offended civil rights' advocates, while family members often saw little progress being made by their troubled relatives in these institutions. New drugs also made an important contribution to this trend. Some of the medications were almost miraculously effective and allowed certain patients to lead 'normal' lives and to take care of themselves. Lastly administrators saw that they could save large amounts of money by bidding these individuals a friendly good-bye. The process of turning the patients loose was usually accompanied by serious evaluations to ensure that they were not suicidal nor a danger to others. They were also invited to return to the institutions that discharged them, on an outpatient basis whenever they felt the need. In theory, the return of the patients 'to the community' sounded humane and reasonable.

In reality they were often just dumped onto an already overloaded welfare system. Social workers and administrators ended up having to cope with too many clients. All of this took place under the many State or Provincial jurisdictions which makes generalisations not very reliable. Having dealt with a group of mostly male welfare recipients as a food bank volunteer for more than five years, I observed that the former mental patients among them exhibited characteristics which would make them poison in an already very difficult labour market. While all of our clients had difficulty surviving on their monthly cheques, the former mental patients often seemed particularly forlorn. These people needed help because the old institutions were not going to be re-opened or expanded. However, as little political will to take action existed, this help could not be too expensive.

One solution has been offered successfully by L'Abri en Ville, a non-governmental organization, which provides shelter for some of the former patients. As do other useful NGOs, it not only helps its clients but also serves as an example of an approach that works. It's the same old story; the problem is very large, and small solutions won't overcome it. But they will help. Eleanor Roosevelt liked to quote the expression: "It is better to light a candle than to curse the darkness," and she was acquainted with huge problems.

L'Abri en Ville received its status as a registered charity for tax purposes in 1991 and opened its first apartment for adults with a serious mental illness in 1992. There are now ten apartments, with three residents each, all paying their own rent. Each apartment is supported by a professional coordinator and a team of volunteers – a kind of 'circle of friends' who help residents end the isolation many have suffered and create links between them and the larger community. For the most part these volunteers have come from faith communities (so far only Christian

and Jewish). They act as friends, visiting the residents, taking them to appointments or to places of mutual interest, involving them in activities with others, helping them to become more independent and developing their talents. The coordinators deal with practical problems such as medication. The directors of l'Abri estimate that it takes about a hundred support persons including directors, coordinators, volunteers, fundraisers and unpaid office staff to operate the apartments which are now functioning. Since the need is very great, a decision had to be made whether to increase the size of the organisation with the danger of it becoming a bureaucracy, or to replicate its structure. Wisely, in my view, L'Abri chose the latter course. In January of 2004 Les toits d'Emile was launched in Chateauguay, a town on the south shore of the St. Lawrence River in Greater Montreal. This was the first group to adopt the L'Abri En Ville model and to apply it to its own community. The second, also located on the south shore, was Our Harbour/Le Havre in St. Lambert/Greenfield Park.

These events have spurred L'Abri to more formal efforts in replication and the publication of a guidebook entitled Community-Supported Housing: The L'Abri en Ville Model.

L'Abri's website is: www.labrienville.org. At Riposte Journal we are delighted that an effective NGO was started so successfully in its own neighbourhood.



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