

IN MY OPINION

Caroline Porter

Bring back the mental institutions

Governor Jim Thompson left an enormous, disgraceful legacy to the people of Illinois — the dissolving of most of the State's mental institutions. I'm not an expert on this subject, just an Illinois citizen who is concerned about the lack of protection of mentally ill people who are trying to cope by themselves and have social and criminal problems because of their illnesses.

The current mental health professionals will violently disagree that anyone who needs help is not getting it, and I have a great respect for the tremendous programs we have in place in institutions such as Bridgeway and St. Mary's Square. But these programs just don't go far enough.

Several years ago, I wrote a news feature about mental illness and the court system. I interviewed Jim Harrell, Knox County Public Defender and several sociologists and psychologists at Bridgeway's predecessor, Spoon River Mental Health Center. Of course I can't find the article but Mr. Harrell discussed the problems of dealing with mentally ill people in the process of trials and certainly, sentencing. It's pretty fuzzy and very complicated. After the closing of the mental institutions, it is guessed that many of our mentally ill now live in our Illinois prisons, to the tune of 30 percent of the prison population. This is hardly

compassionate or adequate caring for a huge segment of our population.

Last year a pamphlet was distributed by the Lutheran Network on Mental Illness/Brain Disorders and they say unequivocally that mental illness is disorders of the brain that disrupt a person's thinking, feeling, moods and ability to relate to others. These disorders, it says, are biological and not caused by poor parenting, bad companions or lack of willpower.

It says that more than 5 million people in the United States suffer an acute episode of mental illness each year and the total price of the illness is \$81 billion, including hospitals, medications, lost wages, family caregiving and losses due to suicide.

Twelve percent of the 63 million children under the age of 18 have mental, behavioral and/or developmental disorders. Only one out of five get treatment. There are more suicides than homicides each year in America. Experts estimate that 90 percent of all victims suffer from treatable psychiatric disorders, often depression. Johns Hopkins hospital says only 20 percent of those with depression are being treated and it is a very treatable condition.

The pamphlet continues: 140,000 Americans with brain disorders are homeless. Another 160,000 are



institutionalized in jails and prisons.

The concept is brought down to the level of a church congregation. "Public health statistics reveal that in every congregation of 500 persons, there will be 5 with schizophrenia, 5 with bi-polar disorder (manic-depression) and many more with major depression. There will be those with obsessive-compulsive disorder, anxiety disorders and panic attacks. Some of these will be children and teens."

The purpose of the pamphlet is to point

out that many of us need help with mental illness at one time or another and that all mentally ill people should be treated as anyone with a disease — that we should express our concern and offer help.

But my point is that there are seriously mentally ill people who need to live in an institution and be protected from themselves. Obviously, there are schizophrenics who are fine with medicine, for example, but sometimes decide they don't need it. That's part of being mentally ill, I would think, that one's view of a situation isn't always very realistic. These are the people who have hurt or killed themselves and others, and what a tragedy that is.

Then there are mentally ill who are placed inappropriately in nursing homes and residential facilities, where they are simply given a bed, with no proper treatment and no hope of returning to the community.

And what about the rights of the mentally ill? I think they have a right to proper treatment even if it includes confinement and to be protected from society and themselves.

The days of the "snake pit" are over. We ought to again be establishing good mental institutions and face the fact that in Illinois we are no longer providing adequate health care for mental illness.