

Access Press

Volume 20, Number 3

Minnesota's Disability



Community Newspaper

March 10, 2009

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History Note

Department for Incurables questioned years later

by Luther Granquist

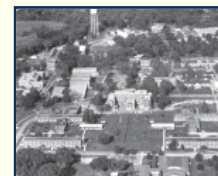
One hundred years ago this month the Minnesota Legislature passed a law creating a Department for Incurables at what was then called the School for the Feeble Minded at Faribault. This new department was for "any crippled or deformed child who is helpless and who cannot be benefited by treatment at the State Hospital for Crippled and Deformed Children [the name for the predecessor of Gillette Hospital], or any child who is physically helpless from any chronic disease of the nervous system or any child or adult suffering from such or other incurable chronic invalidism." The following year the Faribault Superintendent's Report described the three persons admitted to this new department: "one young woman incapacitated by reason of rheumatic arthritis, another largely helpless from deformity of feet and hands, one man suffering from paralysis which renders him absolutely helpless, unable to even raise a hand or foot."

For the next several years, the reports stated that there were two or three persons in this department. Occasionally, until at least 1934, the superintendent reported that an "incurable" or two were admitted. But those reports provided no details and no explanation why that category existed.

The obvious question, yet unanswered, is who or what prompted our Legislature to create this department of "incurables." In the late 19th century, other states had a "Home for Incurables." But the Faribault school was already divided into a school department, a custodial department and a "colony" for persons with epilepsy. The Superintendent, Dr. A. C. Rogers, had long contended that there was no cure for "feeble-mindedness," yet he also thought that the children in the custodial department could learn simple tasks. He did not ask for this new department in his reports.

A second question is why this law creating the department stayed on the books until 1961, even though it had been renumbered and amended through the years. Perhaps it was because during those years the men and women at Faribault with severe multiple handicaps, those deemed helpless, were treated so poorly. Even in the mid-1950s, a blue-ribbon committee of doctors who reviewed the state hospital system, while they recommended more staff and more attendants, made no mention of the need for physicians skilled in physical medicine and rehabilitation or for physical therapists, occupational therapists, and speech therapists. A decade later, Faribault State Hospital still had no consultant in physical medicine and no physical therapists. The "department of incurables" may have ceased to exist, but the perception that nothing could be done remained.

The History Note is a monthly column sponsored by the Minnesota Governor's Council on Developmental Disabilities, www.mnddc.org or www.mncdd.org and www.partnersinpolicymaking.com ■



Pictured above is the School for the Feeble Minded located in Faribault.

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