

Bill Sackter's story highlights need for apologies

by [Luther Granquist](#) // April 10th, 2010

In 1983 the Minnesota Department of Public Welfare filed a claim for almost \$10,000 against the estate of Bill Sackter for care provided him in his years at Faribault State Hospital. In a *Star Tribune* article by Eric Black, Sackter's guardian, Rabbi Jeffrey Portman, responded that Sackter's estate had only \$127. But even if there were more Portman said he would do everything he could to make sure that the state got no money. On the contrary, he said that the state owed the estate \$22,000 for back wages for years of unpaid work and for medical care to treat injuries Sackter suffered while at the state hospital.



Black reported that the Department's Deputy Commissioner Frank Giberson explained that the request was a routine attempt to recover the taxpayers' money. Giberson explained that the state would make no attempt to collect anything, but that the chances that the state would pay anything to Sackter's estate were "something less than remote." Giberson added "We've got better things to do than review and rationalize the treatment of people who were institutionalized years ago."

Giberson's response underscores the importance of House File 1680, the Apology Bill supported by Advocating Change Together (ACT) during the current legislative session. As of late March the bill was going through a series of readings and hearings.

Sackter is well known because of the 1981 movie "Bill" starring Mickey Rooney and the more recent documentary, "A Friend Indeed." But there are hundreds of men and women who, like Sackter, were sent to the state hospital because of state policy that said children with an IQ below 50 "shall be regarded as too defective for proper care and training in the public schools and shall so far as possible be sent to the proper state institution at Faribault."

Hundreds of men and women worked in the kitchen or the laundry or cared for children at Faribault for no pay or for wages of 50 cents a month. Hundreds of men and women suffered contractured limbs from languishing in bed or lying on the floor. And the state's doctors sterilized more than 2,500 persons, most of them women.

These wrongs happened years ago. Giberson was correct; the chances of monetary compensation are "something less than remote." But Giberson was wrong when he said that state officials have better things to do than review and rationalize the way we as a state failed these men and women. ACT's apology bill proposes that the Minnesota Legislature and the state say "We're sorry." A formal declaration that we as a state have wronged these men and women should prompt us to consider the consequences of similar actions and policies today, and to vow that we will not tolerate neglectful and inhumane practices.

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