

Agency helps mental patients readjust

Stories by MIKE LEE
Of the Emerald

"Mental illness has been something that people have put in the closet," says VISTA volunteer Bob Adler.

Adler, 27, works with Socialization Outreach, one of 22 agencies involved in the After Care program. The program helps bring former mental patients into the community.

May is "National Mental Health Month" and May 8 has been designated After Care Day in Lane County. An open house that will be held Monday from 11 a.m. to 6 p.m. at the various agencies, with special displays and information at Harris Hall, 125 E. 8th Ave.

"Lane County has one of the most advanced (after care) systems in the Northwest," claims Adler. "We want to let people know what more has to be done."

He points to new treatments. "Through the means of chemotherapy, people who normally had to be institutionalized

can now come out into the community," he says, because they "can take more stress than before."

Many of the patients involved in the After Care program (more than 2,500 people in the past three years, according to Adler) come from institutions such as Oregon's state hospital in Salem and the Veterans Administration hospital in Roseburg.

Once released, patients go through a program of "socialization" and medical treatment.

"It's been pushed on them that they're incompetent, but we... start showing them how they can succeed in very basic success-oriented goals and slowly build up," Adler says.

The first objective is to find housing.

"They can't deal with socialization if they don't have a place to stay," says Adler. "They're out in the street — that's exactly where they don't need to be."

He says some are sent to halfway houses, some to foster and

nursing homes; some are able to live by themselves after a while.

"It's important that... they're related to as human beings rather than as some sort of 'freak' or 'weirdo,'" he says. "From there they start getting some confidence that 'maybe they're okay,' and we try to bring them out of their living situation and get them with other people."

The former patients find it hard to adjust to society's ways, says Adler. He indicates they lack in basic social skills, are intimidated easily, have problems buying food, and in extreme cases "can't even clean up their house."

Socialization Outreach goes out into the county (a group meets as far away as Florence) to teach people skills like going to restaurants or preparing meals, says Adler.

Starting in a "safe, nonthreatening environment," Outreach "brings them out into new experiences (and) gives them a chance to be with other people to show they can go out and start to interact," he says.

The alternative? "These people wouldn't have any people to communicate with," he states.

Outreach's goal is to get jobs for the former patients, such as the janitorial work one apartment management firm offers. The benefit of such a job is that it pays immediately after the work is done. "Motivation," as Adler puts it.

The goal, unfortunately, is not attainable by all.

"Some of the people will never get to that stage," admits Adler, "but they'll be a lot happier in the community than at the hospital."



Photo by Greg Gawliowski

Robert Adler

MHA job positions open

Students interested in work in the mental health field, either paid or volunteer, should contact the Mental Health Association in Lane County (MHA) at 344-6092. MHA's offices are at 1893 Garden Ave., Suite 4.

MHA projects include:

- Community Friends Program, which gives support and friendship to those with mental and emotional disturbances.
- Lucy Booth, an information, referral and advice booth at the Saturday Market.
- Public Mental Health Education Program, which includes task forces, workshop planning, publicity and administrative-level positions.

Anyone may join the MHA. Members (who pay a \$3 per year fee) receive a newsletter and reduced-admission at MHA-sponsored events. The fees are used to support MHA activities.

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You need only be a UO Student registered this term to file for one of these offices (however, only those majors within the above-listed majors are eligible to run for SUAB). For more information, call the ASUO Elections Board at 686-3724, or come into Suite 4, EMU.

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