

Dukakis meat-axes funds for mentally ill

by Kathleen Klenetsky

“You would think that someone who has had such personal experience of mental illness would have a much more compassionate attitude toward the plight of the mentally handicapped!” That indignant comment, voiced by an individual involved in fighting for the basic human rights of persons suffering from mental illness, sums up the attitude of many Massachusetts citizens to Gov. Michael Dukakis’s cutbacks in funding for state mental health facilities and other direly needed social services.

Faced with the collapse of his vaunted “Massachusetts miracle,” Dukakis is doing what has by now become second nature: he’s trying to make up the budget shortfall by gouging the most vulnerable sections of society. The governor and his chief financial officer, Frances Keefe, have frozen a substantial portion of the funds that should have been spent on upgrading the state’s facilities for the mentally ill, even though conditions in Massachusetts facilities for the mentally disturbed border on Bedlam.

Nine patients have died in the past year alone, because of insufficient staffing and lack of proper medical care. None of the hospitals run by the state are accredited, and in 1985, the system was ranked 41st among the states by the Public Citizens Health Research Group. Reportedly, the PCHRG will downgrade that rank to an abysmal 42nd, when it releases its new report on state mental facilities in September.

An article in the Aug. 21 *New York Times* gave some indication as to why such a liberal state, with such a self-styled “progressive, caring” governor, should receive such a low ranking: Some patients in the state mental facilities are kept in rooms where temperatures register over 100°F, and sleep on bare mattresses in crowded, decaying buildings. Some of the state hospitals run at 220% of capacity.

Anne M. Corapi, president of the Alliance for the Mentally Ill, told the *Times* that, for the past year, her group has complained to the Dukakis administration “of the water fountains, fecal matter on plywood bathroom doors that breed bacteria, lack of smoke detectors and keys that don’t unlock doors. In December,” she reported, “we asked for dental care

for a man whose teeth are blackened and down to the gum. He’s still waiting. Can you imagine the pain? It took months to get the administration to open the window in the seclusion room where it gets to 105° in the winter.”

At least three suits have been brought against the state and/or its mental health department in the past few months: one by the Alliance for the Mentally Ill, charging that Dukakis’s withholding of allocated funds for mental health services is unconstitutional, and two by families of two of the patients who died at Worcester State Hospital.

‘Meat-Axe Mike’ does it again

Despite these inhuman conditions, Dukakis has withheld about \$17 million that the legislature allocated to improve care for the mentally ill, to try to balance the state’s galloping budget deficit. According to several sources, that money included a personal needs allowance provision, which would have given the princely sum of \$65 per month to several hundred state mental patients who had no other income, as well as operating funds that would have paid for extension cords for fans, and an expansion of community residential facilities.

The \$17 million withheld is part of a five-year, \$450 million plan adopted by the state in late 1985 to improve the state’s mental health system. Although Dukakis has taken credit for this expansion program, Geoffery Brahmaer, director of the Alliance for the Mentally Ill, has pointed out that Dukakis went along with the program because he was under intense political pressure to clean up the state’s mental health facilities, which had become commonly known as “the black holes.” A federal court was threatening to take over the state mental hospitals, and Dukakis, Brahmaer said, wanted to avoid this at all costs, since the federal government had been forced, much to his political embarrassment, to take over state facilities for the retarded during his first term as governor.

In balancing the budget on the backs of those least able to defend themselves, Dukakis is operating according to profile. Faced with a similar budget crisis during his first gubernatorial term, Dukakis—publicly boasting that he intended to wield a “meat axe, not a scalpel” to cut spending, slashed funding on programs for the handicapped and other social services to the bone, so incensing his liberal allies that they helped turn him out of office in 1978. “As a result of what Dukakis did in his first term,” said one of the people currently protesting his mental health cutbacks, “people died in state mental institutions.”

The same individual—an ardent Democrat—pooh-poohed the idea, spread by Dukakis partisans, that the governor had undergone a transformation between his first and second terms. “Dukakis is extraordinarily sophisticated. He knows how to manipulate the process so that on the surface he sounds really good. But it’s a deception, as his actions in the area of the mental health budget make clear.”

Another observer noted pointedly, “What do you expect from someone who pulled the plug on his own brother?”