



—Randy Thomas Photo

HANDICRAFTS WORKSHOP . . . Len Lorimer works on project in workshop run by Mental Patients Association

Mental patients fear loss of autonomy

By KARENN KRANGLE
"Ashes to ashes, dust to dust, if the feds don't fund us, the provincials must . . ."

That comes as a sigh of resignation from the Mental Patients Association, whose five halfway houses for former Riverview Hospital patients face drastic changes when federal funding runs out at the end of next month.

The MPA, which operates the houses on a co-operative, self-help basis, may have to accept funds from the provincial department of human resources to keep them open after Aug. 1.

But they're not happy about it, claiming provincial funding will cause residents to lose their autonomy because Human Resources Minister Bill VanderZalm has suggested the houses be funded as personal-care homes.

"Personal-care home funding is the same as the provided to institutions — like psychiatric boarding homes where staff care for, feed and medicate the patients," said MPA research co-ordinator Jackie Hooper, in an interview Wednesday.

"MPA is run by ex-mental patients for ex-mental patients.

"We have developed a successful self-help model in housing which differs radically from traditional psychiatric boarding homes in that our residents pay their own rent, buy their own food, shop for and plan their own meals and run their communal facilities themselves."

She added that the residents also interview and select new residents and resource staff (two per house), which allows them

to regain decision-making power lost in Riverview.

Mrs. Hooper said the houses also allow ex-mental patients to re-learn basic "survival" skills such as shopping, cooking, cleaning, laundering and how to get along with fellow residents.

She said the MPA, which was founded in 1971 with Opportunities For Youth and Local Initiatives Project grants, began the residence program in 1972 with the renting of two houses.

A third house was purchased in 1973 through a 100 per cent Central Mortgage and Housing Corp. mortgage. That same year the federal government granted a three-year, \$200,000-a-year Local Employment Assistance Program grant to pay for 20 co-ordinators' salaries, she said.

"The three years are finished July 31," she said, adding that, since 1973, the MPA has purchased four more houses plus two small apartment blocks."

"We now hold half a million dollars in real estate."

Mrs. Hooper said that in addition to the LEAP money, the Vancouver Resources Board has granted the MPA \$43,949 until April, the city social planning department has given the association \$14,229 and the department of human resources granted the MPA a \$10,000 activity grant to pay for its handicrafts workshop.

"But that doesn't pay for the homes," she said, explaining that the MPA also operates a drop-in centre, office and the workshop in four storefronts in one of the association's apartment

blocks at 2146 Yew, plus an office out at Riverview.

"We do hospital visits, work with people and do referrals for housing out there," she said. "The MPA is into anything to do with the rights of mental patients."

"What we desperately want is outright funding for housing. The human resources personal-care funding will interfere with what we're doing because, people won't be able to pay their own rent or won't be able to stay indefinitely."

Mrs. Hooper said that although the average stay in the homes is about six months, some residents have remained for two years or more because there's no time limit.

"The whole program is set up for people to mature, change and learn to operate independently and if they have to move and look for a job at the same time, it can be too much for them," she said.

"We'll take the human resources funding if we're up against the wall, rather than close the homes, but it will hinder more than help because it's hard to fit a self-help group into a bureaucratic structure."

She said 48 patients now live in the houses, with many more visiting the drop-in centre and that at least half of the MPA's 23 salaried staff are ex-Riverview patients.

"The majority of the people here have been seriously ill — although we don't label anybody," she said.

"Drop-in members represent a complete spectrum of emotional problems — the professional who has suffered a breakdown; the unemployed, desperately unsure of their present

capabilities and fearful of being alone with their tormenting thoughts."

"Or the street-drug user who has sworn off his habit but depends on psychiatric medication and companionship to prevent recurring freak-outs; the single mother fighting depression in an uncaring society; the suicidal; the unloved; the unlovely."

Mrs. Hooper said the MPA also is trying to convince provincial Health Minister Bob McClelland that the homes fall under

his department's jurisdiction. Despite repeated letters, he has not replied, she said.

She said the MPA also has appealed unsuccessfully to the federal health and welfare department although Prime Minister Pierre Elliott Trudeau told the association in a June 8 letter that he has asked Manpower and Immigration Minister Robert Andras to review the MPA's LEAP funding.

But Andras has not notified the MPA, she said.

CPA in Western