

Self-help is target of mental patients

By GORDON HARDY

Members of the Mental Patients Association do not hire the 21 paid employees who staff the Vancouver-based organization - they elect them every six months at long, rambling meetings that can be as colorful as they are democratic.

At one such meeting, members' dogs were solemnly declared non-voting members. At another, MPA's baseball team was baptized The Napoleons.

MPA's general elections July 12, which filled positions ranging from staff for a drop-in centre at 2146 Yew to carpenters and secretaries, reflect an approach to mental patients that has attracted the attention of psychiatrists and mental patients from all over North America.

Pat Oram, a former patient who is now responsible for MPA's housing program, said: "The 150 mental patients, former mental patients and their friends who make up MPA are willing to put up with the occasional shake-up in order to make sure that they, and not professionals or non-patients, maintain their control over the organization."

MPA's anti-psychiatric stance has resulted in several head-on clashes with the staff of Riverview Hospital since the organization was founded by an ex-mental patient in 1972. MPA has been sharply critical of the hospital's policies on drug therapy, involuntary confinement and alleged abuse of patients.

But the skirmishes fought have not prevented a degree of cooperation - MPA operates a drop-in centre on hospital premises and meets regularly with hospital staff to air opinions.

Riverview executive director Mervyn Hislop said his staff has a good working relationship with MPA despite the occasional storm.

In keeping with its determination to keep professional psychiatrists and social workers out, MPA has a long-standing policy that 50 per cent of the

employee-members, democratically called coordinators, should be former mental patients.

At the recent election, one woman candidate said: "I'm an ex-mental patient. I've been a manic depressive for 15 years or maybe longer. I was first hospitalized when I was 15. But I can manage. I've raised five children as a single parent."

She lost but her mental-patient past was in her favor.

In contrast to professionally-run organizations for mental patients like the Canadian Mental Health Association, MPA is run by mental patients themselves.

All decisions right down to how much coffee to serve each day in the drop-in centre are voted on by members and member coordinators in a seemingly endless series of meetings.

(Not that all decisions are minor - members make decisions regarding the two apartment blocks and five communal houses MPA owns throughout the city thanks to generous financing from the Canadian Housing and Mortgage Corp. They are insured at \$282,500.)

Behind all this busy democracy are the key words "self-help," the concept on which everything at MPA hinges.

"The idea of mental patients helping themselves as individuals and as a group is vital. Mental hospitals and psychiatrists subject mental patients to a process in which they are robbed of their ability to look after themselves," said Alex Verkade, a former mental patient from Alberta who works in the drop-in centre.

"In hospitals mental patients forget how to cook and dress themselves properly because it's all done for them. They become lazy or incapacitated by lack of self-confidence. Then, when they get out, they're out of joint with society, unable to cope. The result is they end up back in hospital," he said.

"I know - I was there myself," he said.

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