

NASMHPD POSITION STATEMENT ON STATE PSYCHIATRIC HOSPITAL PATIENT CEMETERIES

The members of the National Association of State Mental Health Program Directors (NASMHPD) believe that it is fundamentally important to treat all human beings with dignity and respect. States should be responsible for appropriately maintaining patient cemeteries that were created on the grounds of state psychiatric hospitals. However, some of these cemeteries have become neglected and not maintained in a manner that conveys respect and dignity. In some situations, it is impossible to locate accurately the grave sites of former patients.

Forgotten and neglected graves of persons who died in state psychiatric hospitals convey a message of devaluing the people who struggled with mental illness, contribute to the burden of stigma that people still face today, and perpetuate a negative image of the state hospital. Restoration and acceptable maintenance of the patient cemetery are important to the consumers and their families as a symbol of hope and recovery and it is important to the hospital and the mental health system as a symbol of conveying dignity for consumers. The process of restoring and maintaining the cemetery can promote healing and recovery.

Recommended Actions by States:

State mental health authorities should investigate the history and determine the condition of patient cemeteries on the grounds of state psychiatric hospitals and consider the following:

- Encourage, support, and partner with consumer organizations and other stakeholders to establish cemetery restoration projects;
- Consult the CMHC technical assistance manual that was developed by the Georgia Consumer Council and the National Empowerment Project;
- Identify potential strategies to
 - Locate grave sites and make location available to families and consumers
 - Restore cemeteries
 - Provide perpetual care
 - Construct a memorial if all grave sites cannot be located.

Approved by the NASMHPD Membership on July 31, 2001.