

**Concord Monitor – May 2, 2017**

***Our Turn: State must stop conflating mental illness with criminality***

**By BEATRICE COULTER and WANDA DURYEYEA**

We at Advocates for Ethical Mental Health Treatment are very pleased to see earnest discussions have commenced in the Legislature about expanding capacity at New Hampshire Hospital. While the proposal is reactive and not the result of a cogent strategic plan, it is a step in the right direction. Now that the conversation has begun, it is time to also include the Secure Psychiatric Unit in this conversation. The opportunity to end the practice of sending non-adjudicated civilly committed individuals to the New Hampshire State Prison should now be upon us.

While the actual number of how many individuals are transferred to the prison appears to be influenced by who is doing the reporting, the fact there is any number to report is too many. This primitive practice has been part of the clinical culture in New Hampshire for decades. It violates constitutional protections as well as violating the Americans with Disabilities Act. It is inconsistent with well understood treatment principles. Now is the time for the state to not only come into compliance with the law, but abandon the mythology that SPU is a forensic hospital. It is not. It is simply a place in the prison where behavioral health treatment is provided by a contracted vendor. SPU does not satisfy or meet any of the standards required for accreditation. SPU is not subject to review by any outside agency as it does not qualify for reimbursement. The Department of Corrections is also not subject to the administrative rules, contributing to a facility that has little accountability or transparency.

This practice has created two classes of civilly committed individuals in New Hampshire. Those who are treated at an accredited facility and those sent to the prison. These individuals become de facto prisoners under the supervision of the Department of Corrections. The disparity of treatment is evident. Women are also transferred into SPU. In September 2016 families members who have loved ones housed in SPU testified before the Legislature alleging abuse and neglect. In 2008 a civil suit was settled after a corrections officer sexually assaulted several women housed in SPU. That individual was later convicted and is now serving a prison sentence. A complaint was filed with United States Department of Justice regarding the practice in 2016 by the Treatment Advocacy Center. We should no longer tolerate such conditions.

As an examination of the mental health system moves forward, the doors to SPU need to finally be closed for those who have never committed a crime. Rather, it is time to examine the resources New Hampshire Hospital requires to satisfy its core mission and treat all the citizens of New Hampshire needing acute psychiatric care. Please make your voice known and let your state senator and representative know this is unacceptable and must be stopped. The state must no longer conflate mental illness with criminality. Then and only then will the current examination of our mental health system be both comprehensive and compassionate.

*Beatrice Coulter and Wanda Duryea are the founders of Advocates for Ethical Mental Health Treatment.*

**The Washington Post – May 2, 2017**

***A mentally ill woman's harrowing final days: 'God Knows Where I Am'***

**By Amy Ellis Nutt**

No one knows exactly when Linda Bishop drew her last breath, though it was likely Jan. 13, 2008, or soon thereafter. What is known is where she died — in an empty New Hampshire farmhouse she'd

entered illegally — and that she died of starvation. Her badly decomposed body wasn't found until that May, along with a pair of white Reebok sneakers, socks and two spiral notebooks. Those were her only belongings.

It is those notebooks, the journal of the last months of Bishop's life, that form the basis of the remarkably moving new documentary, "God Knows Where I Am," by brothers Jedd and Todd Wider. If the movie is a haunting depiction of the life and last days of a seriously mentally ill woman, it also tells an excruciatingly familiar story: the slow spiral into psychosis, the tug-of-war with medication, the ineffectual hospitalizations and the hamstrung family unable to stem the inevitable decline. What makes the film so different and so poignant are the words Bishop left behind in those notebooks. A month before her death, she wrote:

Dear God, please save me. I'm trying, but I don't know what to do. All she needed to do, it turned out, was to walk across the street to a neighbor's home. But like so many mentally ill people — Bishop was diagnosed as having bipolar disorder with psychosis — her illness kept her trapped inside her own delusions: There are no indications I should be doing anything else than what I'm doing.

"We wanted to use her story as a window to take a deeper look into many of the problems the seriously mentally ill face," said Jedd Wider. "The more we got into the journals the more we wanted to tell the story from Linda's eyes, create an experiential documentary ... What would one feel as they sit there in silence, in darkness, in the middle of the night? Most of the films we've seen on mental illness, you're viewing it from the third-person or the second-person perspective. We had the benefit of Linda's own words. We wanted to bring them to life."

*The Widens — Todd is a surgeon by trade, Jedd a lawyer — have devoted themselves to producing documentaries addressing social justice issues for the past 16 years, including the 2012 Emmy-award-winning film "Mea Maxima Culpa: Silence in the House of God." The film, about a priest who sexually abused boys at a Milwaukee school for the deaf, also won a Peabody award.*

What drew the Widens to make their new film, which they also directed, was a 2011 New Yorker article about Bishop by Rachel Aviv. Bishop was bright, funny and creative, but she descended into psychosis in early adulthood and, though helped by medication, was from then on generally noncompliant. Even so, with the help of a devoted sister, she'd been able to raise a daughter after getting divorced and to work as a waitress. But off her medication, she eventually abandoned her adolescent child in pursuit of her delusions.

Bishop's illness eventually landed her in a state psychiatric institution in New Hampshire. After two years of refusing medication, she was finally discharged. By law, when she was released, she had to give consent for her caretakers to notify family. She did not.

[I peered into the universe. Was I sick, or in search of myself?]

So with little more than the clothes on her back, Bishop wandered around Concord, N.H., before breaking into the deserted farmhouse and essentially setting up house, believing she was soon to be "reunited" with a fantasy husband. There she depended on melting snow for water, residual heat from a furnace that had not been completely shut off, and apples from a single apple tree in the yard. Though

she could see the neighbors across the street, she hid from them, only venturing out at night to pick those apples. She was 51.

Part of her daily routine, right to the end of her life, was writing in her spiral notebooks:

- Hiding in attic, just like so many in Nazi, Germany.
- Definitely enjoy not having to be with people right now. I just want to be with my husband.
- I keep wondering how am I going to get out of here.

It is entries like this last one that prove to be so heartbreaking. Mixed in with Bishop's paranoia and delusions were moments of clarity. She knew she was trapped but couldn't make sense of how or why. Later, after her body was found by someone who had come to look at the house, Bishop's sister lamented that she probably had driven by the farmhouse hundreds of times, not knowing Linda was hiding inside.

Even those who are seriously mentally ill "have the ability to see the world around them. But they have a fundamental lack of insight," Todd Wider told *The Washington Post*. "Toward the end, all she had to do was get up and walk across the street ... but at the end of the day she was imprisoned by the demons of her own mind and they kept her from leaving." What becomes clear in the 97-minute film, which is in limited release this spring, is that Bishop was most coherent and functioning when she was taking her prescribed medication. But she also thought, like so many with bipolar illness, that she didn't need that medication. Paul Applebaum, a leading authority on legal and ethical issues in psychiatry who is interviewed in the documentary, calls patients who are untreated, whether in hospital back wards or out on the streets, "rotting with their rights on."

That is the conundrum — and the controversy — at the heart of the film: What does a country founded on individual liberty do with those whose own sickness prevents them from helping themselves? Even Bishop knew the stakes were high: If I stay here I will die. And my survival is proof of my sanity. That's important.

Todd Wider, who actively lobbied for the passage of the Women's Health and Cancer Act of 1998, thinks that arguing for the protection of civil liberties in certain situations is "lazy, socially and politically.

"Would we allow people to wander around with wounds?" he said. "If you were bleeding onto the ER floor, we wouldn't let you leave ... If you're dead, how do your civil liberties serve you? People like Linda can't exercise free will if their mind is not free." This is a film that lingers with the viewer. When the difference between living and dying is a walk across the street, it's impossible not to feel how acutely America is failing the millions struggling with a mental illness.