

# NEWS RELEASE

## Wilfrid Laurier University



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### Study to assess impact of programs for ex-psychiatric patients

A man who has been in and out of psychiatric hospitals now lives an isolated existence in a run-down boarding home and performs monotonous tasks in a sheltered workshop. Another shares in decisions about leisure activities in his housing program and is mapping out his return to school.

Government policy continues to encourage the return of such psychiatric patients to the community, but little is known about the effectiveness of the different housing and support programs that are mushrooming for them.

To assess their impact, researchers from Wilfrid Laurier University and the University of Waterloo are now conducting a major study involving 120 ex-psychiatric patients in different programs in at least four southwestern Ontario communities.

Spanning more than a year, the study will consider whether support programs have a positive impact on adaptation to community living; compare the relative effectiveness of different types of programs; and examine what features contribute most to community integration and well-being.

Geoff Nelson, a professor of community psychology at Laurier and the principal investigator, said Ontario has increased its community mental health budget to \$106.6 million in 1990 from \$13.6 million in 1981. That represents more than twice the rate of increase in the Ministry of Health's total spending.

Yet there has been little research on the community services for ex-psychiatric patients that those dollars are funding. What has been done, Nelson said, has used rates of hospitalization and work activity as measuring rods rather than considering the perceptions of the participants themselves.

"The results of our research should be useful for the direction of mental health policy," said Nelson, who is editor of the Canadian Journal of Community Mental Health. "It should also be of practical benefit to program staff in providing feedback for program development and methods for evaluating programs on an ongoing basis."

Nelson's co-researchers are Richard Walsh, a professor of psychology at Laurier, and Brent Hall, a professor of urban and regional planning at the University of Waterloo. Walsh has directed a day treatment program for ex-psychiatric patients in Sault Ste. Marie and Hall has served as a board member for a supportive housing program in Waterloo Region.

The ex-psychiatric patients involved in the study include those who reside in supportive apartment or group homes, or participate in other support programs in Waterloo, Guelph, Hamilton, and Oakville. Residents of board-and-care homes in the same communities will serve as the comparison group.

Those who agree to participate will be interviewed when they first enter the program and then one year later about the number of times they've been readmitted to a hospital, their quality of life, their level of independence, and social networks.

As well, they'll be asked about their feelings about their housing (including privacy, physical comfort, and participation in decision making) three months after they enter the program and then one year later.

Three earlier pilot studies found that ex-psychiatric patients who had assistance through a housing program or a community support worker were readmitted to hospital less frequently and experienced personal growth.

Nelson said the studies also revealed that some residents of group homes felt their setting still carried the stigma of their mental illness and made it harder to develop friendships outside the home.

The pilot studies have been supported by the Ontario Ministry of Health and the two universities. Nelson is also receiving support through a senior research fellowship of the Ontario Mental Health Foundation.

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Note: With the co-operation of the ex-psychiatric patients and agencies participating in the study, interviews may be arranged with the residents.