



News

Claims of human rights violation

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Mentally ill have nowhere to go: report

DOZENS of mentally ill Victorians have been locked up in psychiatric facilities for years in what has been condemned by the Office of the Public Advocate as a breach of the state's human rights charter.

The office's 2007-08 Community Visitors annual report has highlighted the plight of 99 "long-stay" mental health patients, most of whom are ready to be discharged and moved to community-based facilities but have nowhere suitable to go.

This included eight people aged in their late 30s to 50s who were consigned to remain at the Brain Disorder Unit at The Austin hospital despite being ready for discharge for almost three years.

Public Advocate Colleen Pearce said indefinitely detaining long-term patients in unsuitable accommodation breached their rights to liberty and freedom of movement, as outlined under the Victorian Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities.

"It is not reasonable to limit a person's rights just because the system can't meet their needs," she said.

"The facilities in which these people are living out their lives were never intended to provide life-long accommodation and support. Parts of the mental health system are being used as a 'holding facility' because there is nowhere for them to go."

Ms Pearce said while some patients may need strict supervision, "institutionalising" them sentenced them to a life of social isolation and dysfunction.

The report found there were some people with mental illness living in secure extended care units for up to 20 years. These units are the most restrictive facilities within the mental health system and can be used to house involuntary patients.

Mental Health and Community Services Minister Lisa Neville has asked the state's chief psychiatrist to examine issues raised in the report.

However, she said: "For some patients, particularly those with the most disabling conditions, secure extended care units remain the most appropriate option."

Meanwhile, urgent help was needed for young offenders with mental health problems when they were released from custody, the Youth Parole Board said.

In his message accompanying the 2007-08 annual report, board chairman, County Court judge Michael Bourke, said there were large numbers of young people with mental illness who were in the system.

Judge Bourke also said a disproportionate number of intellectually disabled, rural and Aboriginal young people were under the board's supervision.

The report said offending among 149 young males and nine females was related to drug or alcohol use in 87% of cases.

It said 29% of the offenders had previous child protection involvement; 23% had mental health issues, and 25% had difficulties in intellectual functioning.

An overview of the year's operations said more regular attendance of disability youth workers at parole board meetings and strengthening of parole planning had improved case management of complex clients. -- With PETER GREGORY

KEY POINTS

Ninety-nine patients to go but without a place to stay.

Some on so-called discharge for up to three years.

Intellectually disabled, Aborigines also under board's care.