Working Collaboratively to Preserve and Share Pennsylvania's Disability Records: The Pennsylvania State Archives Perspective

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#SAA19 #s506
The Situation

Issue: PA State Archives is the legally designated repository for many records related to the history of disability in the state, but we have limited collecting, access, and outreach capabilities.

Solution: Establish collaborative relationships with other archives, advocacy groups, and government agencies. Leverage them to fill in gaps in our collections and institutional abilities.
Challenges for the State Archives

- Legally obligated to collect, but only within bounds of retention schedule
- Small accessioning and processing staff
- Geographic spread of records
- No outreach or promotion
- Legal restrictions on access
Importance of State-Run Institutions to Disability History
Our Situation Before Collaboration

• Kept advocates “at arms length”
• Lack of trust for anyone we thought might be trying to collect records we should have
• Many barriers to access, discouraging for research or projects
• Minimal and reactive collecting policy focused on administrative records
Culture Change, More Open to Collaborating

• Leadership more willing to work with outside groups
• Collaboration function moved from collections management to accessioning/outreach
• Began seriously collecting a larger volume of records and needed help collecting and providing meaningful access
• Hosted meeting with all stakeholders- Early 2017
Collaborating with: Government Agencies
PA Department of Human Services

Helps us with our small staff size, geographic spread of collections

- Buy-in and support of Office of Developmental Programs leadership
- Personal visits to all facilities
- Staff worries about losing control of their historical record and that records would be used to demonize the institution
- Personal/emotional connection to records
- Staff help finding alienated records
- Success became a pilot for collecting records from 23 state hospitals and state centers (277 cubic feet)
Collaborating with: Government Agencies
PA Department of Human Services
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Collaborating With: Advocacy Groups
Pennhurst Memorial and Preservation Alliance

Helps us with our limited outreach functions, improving our institutional reputation

- Initial hesitancy to work with us because of our reputation (government bureaucracy, red tape, lack of interest in disability history)
- Tour and visit of State Archives
- “Lives Remembered” Project
- Scholar in Residence Program
- Assistance in locating and directing genealogists, family members, and researchers to archives collections
Collaborating With: Advocacy Groups
Pennhurst Memorial and Preservation Alliance

Elizabeth, nicknamed “Lizzie,” was a girl of 10, with grey eyes and light brown hair when she first came to Pennhurst. She was described as having clean habits and was well-nourished. She could read and write.
Collaborating with: Other Archives
Heinz History Center

Helps us with limits to our collecting abilities, promoting disability history

• Polk Center Receipt (1903-1914)- important collection but not within our collecting scope
• Success working one-on-one with Heinz staff
• Continued partnership finding best home for new collections
Collaborating with: Other Archives
Heinz History Center
Goals moving forward

• Engage more individuals in the disability community and be a better partner to them
• Locate and collect all inactive state institution records
• Emphasis on records of individuals
• Collaboratively promote collections and their interrelationships with other repositories
• Invite more advocacy groups to State Archives to encourage research and other projects
• New State Archives mental health records access policy- get feedback from collaborators and help spreading the word
Most important lessons learned

• Trust is the most important part of any collaborative relationship. Period.
• Collaborations begin before projects and last long after they’re finished. It's not just about “getting down to business”
• Starting out small, even 1-1, can lead to more meaningful results.
• Remember that you represent your entire government/organization and that reputation can impact your relationships.
• Empower staff to pursue relationships independently.
• Support collaborative partners with your existing programs if you don’t have resources to dedicate to new projects.
What was important to collaborators?

• Personal enthusiasm
• Making a “commitment to involving us” in this work
• Understanding different motives of advocates (different organizations and different individuals)
• Encouraging them to share/publish their work
• Be a sounding board for advocates’ projects and ideas
• Make sure they know “we trust you, we want you to be here”
• Social time is important
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