

PHA Speaking Notes

Tyler Stump

Slide 1

Hello everyone, thanks being here today.

My name is Tyler Stump and I am an archivist at the Pennsylvania State Archives in Harrisburg. The archives is the official repository for Pennsylvania's state government, and as part of that we hold the records of Pennsylvania's state hospitals and centers. The records they left behind are a mother lode for historians, researchers, genealogists, and students interested in learning about disability history in Pennsylvania and beyond.

How do I talk about a collection of records that spans 200 years, involves hundreds of thousands of people, and is made up of well over 1000 cubic feet of material? Impossible. So I hope to day to give you a quick overview of the resources and untapped opportunities for research we have here. And once I've got your attention hopefully I can encourage you to come and take advantage of our collections and put them to use.

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Since the first state-run mental institution was opened in Harrisburg in 1845, Pennsylvania operated close to 50 different institutions for people with various physical, psychiatric, developmental, and intellectual disabilities. Some of these institutions are very well known like Pennhurst State School and, while others appear less in scholarship. But they all, and the people who were at them, have a story to tell and their records do just that.

Many of these facilities also served roles as general hospitals, prisons, industrial schools, orphanages, veterans' homes, and sanatariums. So in addition to the value of these institutions as places of disability history, they touch on a range of other topics and groups of Pennsylvanians as well.

In the past, the archives received records from these institutions sporadically, usually when a place closed or when a trove of old materials is "rediscovered" in a basement storeroom or some other place and the space is needed.

However, we've been aggressively collecting and looking out for historical institution records in the last decade- so our archivists are really making sure that the records that come here are the ones that are useful for research.

In general the records of state institutions in the State Archives include administrative and patient records created or received by physicians and administrators at the institution. I'll talk about in more detail in the next slides.

Its important to note the majority of our records are from an institutional or govenrmental perspective.

We do also have some letters, photographs, and other materials that were created by institutionalized people, their families, and disability advocacy organizations. A lot of them can be found in our governor's collections when people were writing to him describing themselves, conditions in institutions, and often their difficulties navigating life in Pennsylvania with a disability. I've found that the volume of these materials increases at times when an institution was involved in a scandal, or when the state was implementing significant changes in their disability and institutional policies.

The bulk of our collections date from around the mid 19th century to the 1970s or so, many records from the 80s up through the present are still in active use by these facilities so we anticipate them coming to the archives once they are no longer in use.

I do also want to mention there are other archives in the state have wonderful collections that do preserve these non-governmental and more recent perspectives- Sierra will be talking about the Heinz History Center and other collecting efforts in Western PA, and Temple University is home to several great collections on disability history in the Philadelphia area as well.

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Records about institutionalized people created in the course of running a state hospital or center are commonly called patient records.

Typically, we have three kinds of patient records from each institution: admission and discharge ledgers, master patient card files, and case files.

Each of these has different levels of detail and types of information, and researchers often use these to track down a particular individual and learn about them, or use the records in aggregate to study larger trends about who is being institutionalized and their backgrounds.

Dennis was talking earlier about the eugenics movement- the impact of this line of thought can be seen in these patient records which have detailed "hereditary" and social information- where the person was from, family information, their occupation, their habits, etc. Some case files even have notes from social workers who interviewed neighbors and family members of an individual. Lots of potential here.

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And along with the patient records, we also have rich collections of administrative records from most institutions. Obviously it varies from one to the next, but in general you'll find the types of records I have listed here on the screen.

And from these administrative records, you really can piece together what life and conditions were like at an institution in general. I'm always a little surprised at how candid these records are, especially ones in the 19th and early 20th century.

I get the sense that the information network that existed between units of a particular institution or between administrators at different institutions was really open and there's a lot of sharing of ideas that

you can see in the records. So if one institution is trying a new quote “industrial therapy” or forced work program at their institution, they document it and are telling others about how its working and its impact. Again, lots of potential for research in a lot of directions here.

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Of course some of the records, especially more recent ones that contain medical information, have some restrictions on them as per HIPAA and the mental health section of the Pennsylvania Code. But the majority of this material, especially the older stuff, is open for research. We’ve been updating our finding aids recently so there’s detailed information on exactly what we have from each institution. And also, we’ve digitized some of the 19th century material and have been putting it online on the PA Power Library site. I’ll put links to both of these in the chat.

And of course, you can always get in touch with me or our reference section, we know these records really well, and also have a good sense of what other archival collections of disability and institutional history are available in the state and we’d love to help connect you with the records.

Our hours are still by appointment only with the pandemic, but normally we’re open 9-4 Wednesday through Friday. Because a lot of our institutional records have special access and handling concerns, I’d recommend contacting us ahead of time to let us know what records you’re interested in viewing.

To conclude, I wanted to share a quote I read recently in a 1946 report from the state Secretary of Welfare about Pennsylvania’s institutions for people with disabilities: she wrote “the...institutions of Pennsylvania belong to the people, and are, in the final analysis, the responsibility of the people. Therefore, it is fitting that the fullest information be made available to the people, for full, free, and public discussion of their operation and the development of their services.”

And that’s something I really take to heart. The archival record of disability (not just the institutions, its broader than that) should be open and analyzed and learned from. I hope we’ll see you in the archives soon!

Thanks!