

The Voice of History

A Question of Justice: Recovery and Civil Rights

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In the 1860s, leaders of the Chicago Washingtonian Home set forth the proposition that every industry ought to be responsible for individuals harmed by its products and actions, leading to the allocation of a portion of liquor license and tax revenues in Cook County for the treatment of alcoholism.

In the 1890s, members of the Keeley Leagues, the alumni support group of the Keeley Institute, the most famous of the early private addiction treatment institutes, marched on the Pennsylvania State Capital to support passage of a law that allocated state funds to subsidize alcoholism treatment at the Keeley Institutes for those who could not afford it. They argued that access to alcoholism treatment should not be the exclusive privilege of the affluent.

In 1906, patients of the Massachusetts Hospital for Dipsomaniacs and Inebriates organized a protest that exposed abusive conditions within the hospital (medical incompetence, patient neglect and abuse, misallocation of patient fees). Their protest also led to reform and the indictment of key staff.

In the mid-twentieth century, recovery advocates challenged “morality clauses” in the bylaws of community hospitals that barred admission of alcoholics. Such exclusions were based on the belief that alcoholics were not morally qualified for medical care. Recovery advocates argued that alcoholism was a disease and that those suffering from it should have equal access to healthcare institutions. During this era, advocates argued before the courts that public intoxication by the chronic alcoholic was an involuntary act and should be addressed via medical care rather than incarceration. Their sustained advocacy led to the decriminalization of public intoxication.

These milestones in recovery history constitute early efforts to elevate civil rights issues within addiction-related public education and health reform movements. Such issues also tied into sovereignty demands even earlier in history when Indian leaders asserted that Native peoples’ status granted their right to banish exploitive whiskey traffickers from tribal lands.

The stigma and shame attached to addiction have worked against transforming recovery advocacy movements into a more fully formed civil rights movement, but that transformation could occur in the opening decades of the twenty-first century. Recovering people, long-silenced, are now declaring their presence and contributions to this culture. We are speaking out against objectifying stereotypes and discriminatory policies that narrow the doorway of entry into recovery. We are confronting discrimination in health and life insurance, housing, education, employment, and social services and are demanding the privileges and benefits available to other citizens. We are moving beyond our own personal recoveries to become catalysts of social change. The time to define the American recovery advocacy movement as a civil rights movement has arrived.

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