



Patricia Siebert

Attorney. Advocate. Community Partner.

Attorney Patricia Siebert began working with Minnesotans with mental illness when she joined the Minnesota Mental Health Law Project in 1983. This was a time, she reminds us, prior to the Comprehensive Mental Health Act, which helped to create the system we have now. “Some counties had mental health services, and some didn’t,” she says. “And if you lived in a county without services and needed care and treatment, you probably ended up in the state hospital.”

While working “to help people get de-institutionalized,” in the mid-1980’s, Siebert had a client in the Willmar State Hospital. He wanted to leave in favor of a residential setting that was less institutional. But, there was a problem: he was a voluntary patient. “A lot of places didn’t want to take him because he wasn’t under commitment and so couldn’t be returned to the state hospital if something went wrong,” she says.

Siebert and the client met with staff at Guild Residences, Inc., the residential treatment program started by Guild Incorporated’s founder, the Guild of Catholic Women. Siebert recalls the long conversation that ensued: “It was about the community’s assumption of risk, and that patients with mental illness shouldn’t be prevented from making determinations about their own lives.”

Guild took the client. “Guild was the only place willing to consider him because he wasn’t under commitment,” Siebert says. “Ever since then, I’ve respected Guild for

being ahead of the curve on issues related to people with mental illness.”

It’s a respect that goes both ways. Since those early days, she and Guild have been assisting one another. “I’ll call about a particular client, often in the hospital, maybe they have a particular twist to their story, and I’m wondering if Guild could help them,” Siebert explains. “Grace [Tangjerd Schmitt] will call to discuss current problems within the mental health system clients are facing; she gives us real life examples of issues we’re working on.” Siebert and Tangjerd Schmitt also work together to impact change in the greater mental health community through task forces and groups like the Mental Health Legislative Network.

Reflecting on the future of mental health care, Siebert still sees work to be done, but she quickly recounts areas of advancement. “When I started, patients in state hospitals were restrained and secluded, sometimes for months. A community understanding of mental illness was missing—very little was known,” she says. “Lots of people receive community mental health services now, and they’ve never been to an institution. Even when people are committed, it’s not as isolating as it was in the past. A lot of progress has been made in how we support people with mental illness.”

Photo: J. Arthur Anderson