



THE INSTITUTE FOR URBAN
POLICY RESEARCH & ANALYSIS
THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT AUSTIN

May 5, 2014

Earl Lewis, PhD
President
The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation
140 East 62nd Street
New York, NY 10065

RE: Central Lunatic Asylum for Colored Insane [Petersburg, Virginia]

Dear Dr. Lewis,

Mayor Shirley Franklin and Dr. Leslie Harris suggested that I contact you to both introduce myself as well as share my Virginia mental health digitization project.

I served as commissioner of the Virginia Department of Mental Health during the Doug Wilder Administration. During that period, I became increasingly aware of the wealth of history, documents, artifacts, records, photographs, books, and related documents about African Americans in Central State Hospital in Petersburg [CSH]. Over the years, I have reviewed hundreds of the original documents that tell the stories of the lives of African American people who were in the hospital during the period of racial segregation [1870-1970].

CSH was the first mental institution in the U.S. opened exclusively for African Americans. Initially, the institution was named Central Lunatic Asylum for the Colored Insane. Its origins can be traced to a requirement from the Freedman's Bureau that health and mental health services be provided to former slaves. State legislation was passed in 1867 to open a separate hospital on land given by the city of Petersburg.

Since its development in 1870, CSH has maintained a complete set of its admission and discharge records, patient demographics, treatment records, reports, board minutes, public policies, photographs, and budgets. The extent of their original materials has been characterized by nationally prominent archivists as the most complete and important collection in the United States. Although most southern states opened segregated mental health facilities, their historical records have not been maintained. Regrettably, CSH's collection has never been kept in a

controlled archival environment. As a result, some of its earliest materials are fragile and showing the effects of age, humidity, and handling. However, the bulk of the collection is in remarkably good condition but was in need of immediate stabilization, protection, and restoration. Several of my graduate students spent last summer at CSH and cataloged close to 800,000 pages of materials and prepared them for copying and preservation.

Because of my long term involvement in African American mental health in Virginia, I agreed to help find funding to digitize, maintain, preserve, protect, and share this important historical collection. We have obtained the interest and involvement of several schools here at the University of Texas at Austin, including the School of Information Science, Architecture, University Libraries, anthropology, social work, and history. Faculty and doctoral students from these programs have agreed to work with me on this project. We have also made contact with the administration of Virginia State University to include their records from the hospital in the project. The VSU archivist serves on the project's board of advisors. We have also had meetings with the Virginia State Archivist and the archival librarian at Virginia Commonwealth University. A member of the department of library sciences at the University of Virginia has also assisted in restoring fragile documents.

We received a \$75,000 planning grant from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration and \$50,000 from the University of Texas at Austin that allowed us to catalog the entire collection, stabilize the materials, and digitize records. To date we have digitized close to 95% of the materials. In April we were advised that the hospital has an additional 500,000 admission cards that are available for copying if funds are available.

We are ready for the more intensive phase of the work that involves building the digital library but lack adequate funds to support faculty and doctoral students to develop it. Our proposals to the National Endowment for the Humanities, Reynolds Foundation, Dominion Foundation, Cameron Foundation, and the Johnson Foundation were not funded. We have also sought funding from the Virginia legislature. To complete the digital project will cost approximately \$350,000 but could be spread over a two year period. Admittedly, this is not an easy project to sell in the current political and fiscal climate. However, part of the value of the project is its implications for current and future mental health policy decisions that could reduce disparities by race that still exist.

I hope that I have captured your interest and imagination in what is a very worthwhile archival project. I am available to meet with you or your staff to discuss the project and answer any questions that you may have. Our project staff can provide a complete proposal to Mellon if requested. I have included a copy of the cover from the first annual report that is part of the collection.

I will be returning to Virginia later this month and will be working on the project full-time.

Sincerely,



King

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R E P O R T

OF THE

Board of Directors and Medical Superintendent

OF THE

Central Lunatic Asylum

(FOR COLORED INSANE),

VIRGINIA,

FOR THE

YEAR 1871-'72.

RICHMOND:

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1872.