

Leadership in Mental Retardation

By Wolf Wolfensberger (1934-2011)

Plymouth State Home and Training School

Ca 1962-1963

EDITORS' NOTE: Dr. Wolfensberger was a newly-minted PhD (ca 1962) and had just started working as a psychologist at a brand-new mental retardation institution in Michigan when he wrote this brief paper addressed to parents. He was quite involved in the voluntary associations of parents and professionals throughout his career, and felt keenly the needs and concerns—the plight—of parents of impaired people. He wrote two books on the topic:

- Wolfensberger, W. & Kurtz, R.A. (Eds.). (1969). *Management of the family of the mentally retarded: A book of readings*. Chicago, IL: Follett.
- Wolfensberger, W. (2003). *The future of children with significant impairments: What parents fear and want, and what they and others may be able to do about it*. Syracuse, NY: Training Institute for Human Service Planning, Leadership and Change Agency. (Syracuse University).

The citation for this paper is

Wolfensberger, W. (2026). *Leadership in mental retardation*. *Harrisburg: International Social Role Valorization Association (ISRVA)*.

<https://wolfwolfensberger.com/posthumous-works/>. (posted February 1st 2026.)

This article does not constitute a criticism of any particular agency or group of workers in retardation, but is a reflection upon a condition existing for a long time in the areas of mental health and particularly mental retardation.

Traditionally, and down to the very present, parents of retarded children have looked to the professional worker for leadership, guidance, direction, and above all, initiative in the field of retardation. Ideally, this is the way it should

be. But I want to register a word of warning here and point to the discrepancy between what is ideal and what is real.

In many human endeavors, scholars, scientists, thinkers or, in short, the “experts” have led society or larger groups of people to new discoveries, more exalted ways of thinking, better programs, etc. By and large, this has not been the case, either in the past or present, in the field of mental retardation. When the field was primarily controlled by the experts, we had “snake pits”, pessimistic attitudes, mass sterilization and, basically, a contempt for the retardate. The experts of old saw little dignity and worth in a retardate. They abrogated some of his basic rights, such as that of education, free movement and opportunity for employment. They tried to negate his humanity by claims that retardates had no feelings and emotions or only abnormal ones, that they had no sense of right and wrong, and that they were, basically, criminally inclined and sexually depraved. Everybody knows that at one time many people held these attitudes. But what is generally forgotten is that not only the general public, but also the professional experts held these opinions.

Who has brought about the changes in much of this? While there was some change from within the professions, I believe that a good deal of it was effected by two other groups of people: (1) the intelligent layman with humanistic, often slightly liberal inclinations, who was appalled when he became aware of the magnitude of the problem and the way it was handled by the experts. Much credit must go to journalists who were often, and still are, among the foremost to influence public opinion by bringing inhumane, sub-standard, and scandalous practices and treatments to the attention of the

public. (2) The parents who finally rejected the pessimistic view which the professional tried (and often still tries) to impose upon them and who took it upon themselves to find a better way.

Today, the professional in retardation functions on a higher level than his colleagues of a generation ago. And yet, even today, quite a few professionals in this area are basically conservative. They often mouth the current clichés, but when it comes to decision making, somehow the decision is often more consistent with a pessimistic and negative outlook than with a positive one. Many programs under the control of professional personnel (some of them nationally recognized figures) are archaic, and I know of at least one public institution in another state, staffed by several well known professionals which is only now emerging from the snake pit stage to being a quarter century behind.

I want to conclude, then, with one bit of advice to parents: don't look exclusively to us for leadership or you will wait yet another hundred years. We will proceed only as fast as we are pushed so, push us! Demand services, demand research, demand training, demand the latest in education and management for your child! To find out what the latest is, don't take anybody's word. Keep in close touch with the thinking at NARC¹ headquarters, as they combine the right attitude with the best current knowledge. And on the local and state level, don't be discouraged or put off by statements that there is not enough money for personnel, facilities and

¹ EDITORS' NOTE: NARC then stood for National Association for Retarded Citizens.

programs. While there will probably never be as much money spent upon retardation as we would wish, even with what is available now we could do better. Some of the best programs are actually considerably cheaper, especially in the long run, than some of the less adequate ones. What is needed most now, even more than money, is **initiative**, **leadership** and **conviction**. Much of that **you** will have to contribute yet for some time.