

Remembrance ceremonies to be held throughout state today

Memorials commemorate unrecognized deaths of mental health patients

By DAN JUDGE, Times-Herald staff writer
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NAPA - Thousands of patients at California's state hospitals died and were buried in mass graves or unmarked burial plots in years gone by. Unknown and alone, their names have been largely lost to the ravages of time.

Today, the forgotten will be remembered. Ceremonies to honor their passing are planned for seven state mental hospitals and developmental centers, including Napa State Hospital.

"Basically, it's just people kind of giving a memorial service for those who have gone before us," said Steve Weeks, a spokesman for the Napa facility. "We just want to keep the idea alive that we don't forget people who passed away in institutions."

More than 45,000 patients have died and were buried at state hospitals or developmental centers between the 1880s and 1960s. Their remains are, for the most part, unmarked in mass grave sites, where numbers and markers disappeared long ago.

During today's memorials, people with mental and developmental disabilities will gather with their friends at seven different burial sites to honor those who died unrecognized.

The ceremonies are part of the California Memorial Project, a collaboration of groups that, as part of its mission, is seeking to restore those cemeteries that have fallen into disrepair. First on the schedule, once funding is attained, will be the abandoned graveyard at the Napa facility where one of today's gatherings will be held.

At Napa State Hospital, about 4,368 people were buried from 1876 to 1923.

The cemetery is now nothing but weeds and rocks, with no indicators that people lie beneath the surface. Thousands more were cremated and placed in large mass graves in local cemeteries.

Plans call for a permanent memorial at the site that includes a large landscaped area, a monument with the names of those buried there - culled from hospital records - and several reflection areas with benches.

The California Memorial Project is a joint effort between The California Network of Mental Health Clients, Protection and Advocacy Inc. and People First of California.

"We're trying to give respect and dignity back to the people who were buried in mass graves or buried without their names," said Alicia Mendoza, Protection and Advocacy's coordinator for the project.

"Many of these cemeteries, you can't tell if a cemetery existed there. There's nothing but a pasture or dirt," she said.

The ceremonies are scheduled for the third Monday of September every year to honor the anniversary of the signing of Senate Bill 1448, the 2003 legislation authored by Sen. Wes Chesbro, D-Arcata. The bill directed multiple state agencies to cooperate with the "client communities" on the organization of the California

Memorial Project.

Chesbro was made aware of the problem when clients of the hospitals and developmental centers brought the issue to his attention, said the senator's spokeswoman Peggy Collins.

"Those grave sites had fallen into a great state of disrepair," she said. "It was reflective of how people dealt with people with mental illness all those years ago."

The project includes cemetery restoration, documentation of oral histories of the individuals that live in state institutions and documentation of the history of the mental health "movement."

"Although it was a sad story and a sad chapter in California's history, it was really a positive project for clients to take control and lead the effort to right that wrong," said Collins.

In addition to the Napa memorial, ceremonies will be held at Mendocino State Hospital in Ukiah, the Stockton Developmental Center, Agnews Developmental Center in San Jose, Sonoma Developmental Center in Eldridge, Patton State Hospital and Metropolitan State Hospital in Norwalk.

If you go

What: Ceremonies of Remembrance, an event to honor those who passed away in state hospitals

Where: Napa State Hospital, 2100 Napa-Vallejo Highway

When: 10:30 a.m. today

Who: Open to the public