

Commentary

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Mentally ill neighbor just needs a bit of help, not a lockup

Feeling a little out of sorts lately? A little suspicious of the neighbors? Your local government may have a deal for you: Just make a few threatening gestures, and you and your untreated mental illness can be hauled off to jail! No muss, no fuss, no meds. And once you've whiled away a few manacled months in jail, you, too, may be eligible for the Gerald Lund Special: a county petition labeling you "mentally ill and dangerous" — and the chance to live in a locked state hospital miles from home.

This offer can't last forever, so you'd best act now. Lund, a sick guy from Floodwood, seems to have lucked out in getting the worst possible deal any schizophrenic could get from his local moguls.

In our story's last episode, his horror story seemed to be drawing to a close: Half a year after Gerald's paranoia apparently led him to brandish a gun and landed him in jail, Judge Mark Munger ruled his pointless incarceration must end.



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He took note of three expert findings that Gerald is mentally ill, and on May 22 directed the county to arrange treatment.

His eight siblings really believed help had come at last. They'd been begging the county to send Gerald to Miller-Dwan Medical Center's psychiatric ward in Duluth since before his November gun antics. They were understandably furious that no one in the system appeared willing to act. They watched as Gerald's condition continued to crumble — until he got scary.

Now, after six months of

dallying, the county's social-services folks seem eager to act. But instead of arranging a move to the local Duluth hospital — where Gerald could be in touch with his psychiatrist and his eight siblings — they've asked the court to declare Gerald "mentally ill and dangerous" and commit him to St. Peter Regional Treatment Center for an indefinite stay. A commitment hearing is scheduled for 8:30 a.m. Monday.

Now, let's think this over. First of all, there's nothing wrong with St. Peter. Rumor has it that it's really a very nice facility — not the "snake pit" some people imagine. But it is the treatment center of choice for Minnesota's intractably dangerous — and that definition just doesn't fit Gerald.

True, Gerald has a history of psychotic episodes, which the county cites in making its commitment case. And yes, when Gerald decompensates and feels people are after him, he tends to reach for guns. But when he gets the psychiatric

treatment he so obviously needs — and of which he's been deprived his entire time in jail — he's actually quite a tranquil fellow. His paranoia disappears. He's not dangerous in the least.

So Gerald doesn't need a trip to St. Peter. He needs a daily dose of antipsychotics — the very thing the county has so long declined to assure him.

Gerald is a living argument for taking schizophrenia seriously — for insisting that its sufferers take medicine without fail. He is an example of what happens when mental-health experts treat a patient until he gets better — and then blithely send him into the world.

Indeed, that's the story of Gerald's life. His history is full of court-ordered hospitalizations and releases, followed by failures to monitor his medication compliance. So it's no surprise that his past is also full of frightening episodes — the sort county officials can invoke as evidence of "dangerousness."

But whose fault is that? The county's mental-health people have known for years that an untreated Gerald is unstable. They've always had the power — indeed, the duty — to see that he takes his meds. Since passage of Minnesota's more flexible commitment law in 2001, their ability to do so has been all the greater.

So what Gerald really needs — has always needed — is someone to keep an eye on him and make sure he does what he must to stay well. If he won't do it, he must be made to do it — with the long shadow of the law looming over him. That's what the 2001 commitment law is all about: early action, before things go wrong.

Public-health departments engineer vigilant medication monitoring for tuberculosis patients and others whose diseases pose public threats. There's no reason they can't do the same for people who become threatening if their brains aren't awash in the right

neurotransmitters.

That strategy makes more sense, at least, than dumping someone like Gerald in a state hospital indefinitely — calling him "dangerous" merely because no one wants to bother keeping tabs on his health close to home.

Truth be told, Gerald isn't as dangerous as St. Louis County is slothful. Its move to ship him off to St. Peter is testimony to its own failure to serve him as it should. Surely the citizens of Duluth can figure out how to keep the community safe while keeping people like Gerald close to home. All it takes is a little ingenuity, a measure of dedication — and a belief that Minnesota's promise of community-based treatment must be fulfilled. It means treating people like Gerald Lund — a great fisherman who needs help taking his meds — like the neighbors they are.

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