



© SENIORS FOR SOCIAL ACTION ONTARIO

EDITORIAL – October 6, 2021

## ONTARIO'S OWN JIM CROW: FORCED SEGREGATION OF DISABLED ELDERS

Most are familiar with the Jim Crow laws in the United States that segregated Black people from White people. In 2010 Michelle Alexander, an African American civil rights advocate, wrote The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness. It was a brilliant treatise on the re-creation of a caste system in the United States that locked millions of African Americans behind bars, ensuring their second class status for the rest of their lives. Alexander's book has lessons to teach us all about castes, labeling, discrimination, exclusion, segregation, and incarceration and how a society can ignore the pain and despair these cause labeled, devalued, and marginalized people when it looks the other way.

Today in Ontario over 70,000 elders and people with disabilities are mass institutionalized for no other reason than that they require assistance with activities of daily living and personal care. We label them, trample on their rights as human beings by uprooting them from familiar surroundings, exclude them from their own homes and communities, segregate them in "old age homes", and literally incarcerate them for the crime of being old and needing help.

The pandemic shone a bright light on their incarceration as even those closest to them were barred from visiting them. They were prisoners in their solitary rooms – some starving and dehydrating to death in the absence of anyone to help them. It was an atrocity that did not even occur in prisons, but it was one visited on helpless, old people, and the Canadian military documented it. Nothing has been done about it. No investigations. No one brought to justice for the extreme harm done to the most vulnerable and devalued people in Ontario.

We go to endless lengths proposing things to try to make these big institutions "seem more home-like". To try to create the façade that these are homes, not institutions, and that residents are being cared for, not incarcerated because they need care.

Thirty two bed units are not homes. And being fed lying down by someone who is standing up is not care. Falling and being left lying on the floor crying for help with no one responding is not humane. Being given the wrong or outdated

medication is not help. But inspection reports are rife with these kinds of accounts, and 85% of the province's long-term care facilities are out of compliance with the Long Term Care Homes Act according to the CBC. Fixing a law will not fix an institution, nor will building even more "modern" institutions.

As a society, we repeatedly look the other way when we see old people forced out of homes and communities they have lived in for a lifetime. We tell ourselves it is "necessary". We do not demand more comprehensive, better funded, in-home care and support, or even small, staffed, neighborhood-based residences so that old people can stay in familiar surroundings. We accept that prettying up a "unit" in a big facility and teaching staff to use emotion-focused techniques will somehow hide the reality of what we are doing to old people - buying into the beautification of the plantation, or in this case, putting lipstick on the pig that is the institutional long-term care system in Ontario will somehow make it all more acceptable.

Too many people who prefer not to look at this system in much depth, it will be enough - until their time comes, but then it will be too late.

The hard questions that need to be asked about a society that looks the other way as old people are literally imprisoned because of their disabilities never get asked. We content ourselves with believing that they are "getting good care" in those institutions, even though none of us would choose to spend even one night there ourselves. We ignore their cries of "I want to go home" - feeding them platitudes or creating false hopes that they may one day see their homes again. But we know these are lies. They will never go home again. And the despair that results when "residents" finally realize that, is the same despair that must have been felt by so many other devalued and socially abandoned people when they realized that they lived in a society, where no matter what was proclaimed about equality and self-determination, that they would never be free.

Despair is the true impact of labeling, exclusion, segregation, discrimination, and incarceration. And that is why, as a so-called civilized society, it is time we stopped looking the other way.