

Speech by Thomas Hester, M.D., Medical Director for Georgia Department of Mental Health

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*Since 1842, when Central State Hospital was founded, more than 44,000 people have died there. Around 30,000 of them are buried on the hospital grounds. Their graves are marked with numbers instead of names to protect their privacy. Joe Ingram, who worked there for 50 years, described the cemetery as a heartbreaking sight. He said, "Rows and rows of small, rusted markers with only numbers. No names, just numbers. It must be the most horrible sight in Georgia. These people were ignored when they were alive, and now, in death, they are still unknown, with only God knowing who they truly were."*

*In March of 1997, things began to change. A group called the Consumer Council visited the cemetery and found that many of the grave markers were overgrown with plants and trash. Some markers were even removed to make the area easier to clean, and it was impossible to match the markers to the people buried there.*

*This visit inspired action. The Consumer Council worked with the State and Central State Hospital to build a gate and try to find as many graves as possible.*

*Through this experience, I've learned that recovery isn't just for individuals, but for entire groups. The Consumer Movement has shown me that people can heal as a group by honoring those who came before them. By giving those who died dignity and respect, we help everyone in the movement recover.*

*I also believe that this idea of recovery has spread to the State and the hospital system. To keep improving, they need to focus on four key steps from the 12-step recovery process:*

- 1. Step.Four: "Made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves." The system has made mistakes, like using too much control through things like restraints, isolation, and medication. The way people were treated, both while alive and after death, showed a lack of respect for their dignity.*
- 2. Step.Five: "Admitted to God, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs." The State and the Facility system have admitted to their mistakes in many settings, including a national conference. I've shared the story of what happened at Central State, and today, I repeat and admit that we have mistreated people.*
- 3. Step.Eight: "Made a list of all persons we had harmed and became willing to make amends to them all." We have started trying to fix the harm done, but we still have more work to do. I am here to apologize on behalf of the State of Georgia and the institutions that have hurt people. We've overused medications, forced people into restraints, and failed to help them recover.*

*But apologies are not enough. We need to take action to make things right. Here are four ways the State is committing to do that:*

- 1. The State will pay for a survey to try to get the cemetery listed on the National Historic Register.*

2. *The State will pay to clean up the graves that are covered in debris and plants.*
3. *The State will help create planters where the unmarked graves are. These planters will hold irises, which symbolize the strength of the people buried there.*
4. *The State will make sure the cemetery is cared for forever, so it never happens again.*

*The system, the State, and the hospitals need to keep recovering. We can't forget what happened at the cemetery or how we treated these people. We must continue to change by promoting recovery, self-determination, and inclusion in the community, while respecting the dignity of every person. Groups can heal together, and I believe that by working together, we can do more than we could on our own.*

*I humbly ask for your forgiveness and promise to turn these commitments into actions.*