

# LOCAL

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SECTION C

## Group opposes forced drugging

**The Freedom Center believes patients being treated for mental illness should have the right to refuse drugs.**

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NORTHAMPTON — As James Bower tells it, when he refuses to take his psychotropic medication, an ambulance and some police officers show up at the door of the group home in Easthampton where he lives.

"I may be handcuffed or not," Bower said. "I'm taken to the hospital and confined."

If Bower still doesn't agree to take the drugs, he said, "they'll hold you down, strap you to a cot, and give you a shot."

Bower, 25, a client of ServiceNet Inc., is being treated for schizophrenia and depression, a diagnosis he insists is wrong. His case has become a rallying point for The Freedom Center, a locally-based group that opposes the forced drugging of

people with mental illness.

Thanks to a Freedom Center campaign, ServiceNet and the Department of Mental Health have been bombarded with e-mails protesting Bower's treatment, as described by the group. More generally, the Freedom Center opposes the involuntary administration of psychotropic drugs and is trying to force the debate on the nature of mental illness and its supposed remedies.

"We believe in self-determination," said Wilton E. Hall, one of the group's founders. "It's all a very individual thing."

Hall, 37, was diagnosed with schizophrenia 10 years ago and says he was coerced into taking medication.

"It added a whole level of trauma to my experience and made recovery much more difficult," he said.

Hall said he eventually went

on to recover without the use of drugs. In 2001, he got together with some other people who had similar experiences and formed The Freedom Center. The group is affiliated with the MindFreedom Support Coalition, an organization started by those who identify themselves as "psychiatric survivors" to advocate for the rights of the mentally ill. Hall said that 10-20 people attend the Freedom Center's weekly meetings and another 20 or so are involved in other ways.

According to Hall, the Freedom Center does not absolutely oppose the use of medications but simply believes patients should have the right to refuse them. However, its members disagree with those in the mental health community who believe that mental illness is a biologically based condition that can be rectified by drugs.

To many mental health advocates, this position threatens to set back years of medical advances. Jane Moser, president of the National Alliance for Men-

tally Ill of Western Massachusetts, said the Freedom Center's actions are "harmful to people with serious mental illness because of their underlying message that you don't need medication, you don't need your caregivers, and your psychiatrists are somehow oppressing, you which undermines trust in the very people that are helping."

Moser said she knows of some people who have gotten involved with the Freedom Center, gone off their medication, and had to be hospitalized. In a couple of cases people committed suicide, she said.

Speaking from personal experience, John W. Shepard of Westfield, who is bipolar, said stopping medication is dangerous.

"When people go off their medication they are not thinking clearly," he said.

Susan Stubbs, the director of ServiceNet, said she could not comment on individual cases because of client confidentiality,

but insisted that no one in her agency's care is held down and administered drugs against their will. According to Stubbs, some people with mental illness are subject to a "Rodgers Order," under which a court-appointed guardian may make decisions about the person's medication. Stubbs described this situation as rare, however, noting that only 15 of the 1,700 people in ServiceNet's care are under a Rodgers Order. "Even in those cases, she said, ServiceNet does not force-medicate."

"If someone refuses to follow a Rodgers Order, we do absolutely nothing," Stubbs said. "We just watch them more closely."

Bower said he has never experienced hallucinations and was originally hospitalized nine years ago after hitting someone with a lacrosse stick. He is under a Rodgers Order, he said, because "people didn't like the way I was acting and wanted to blame it on mental illness."

Staff writer *Patricia Norris* contributed to this report.