

*Excerpt from Chapter 4, On Our Own, Together*

**Portland Coalition for the Psychiatrically Labeled**

*by Janine M. Elkanich*

The Portland Coalition for the Psychiatrically Labeled is a consumer-run drop-in center in Portland, Maine. We are currently located in the center of downtown Portland, easily accessed by most members since we are in walking distance for them. The drop-in is a fifteen hundred square foot, one-floor building that I would have to say resembles an overly wide hallway with only one bathroom. This is a huge issue because we have between eighty and one hundred people drop in every day. Administrative offices are located in the back of the drop-in center in a small office that was specially built when we leased the space.

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In June 1983, Linda Ladew and other members of the Coalition organized a protest against the treatment of psychiatric patients in the emergency room at Maine Medical Center, where people in psychiatric crisis often waited alone for many hours in a windowless room under guard before being helped. The protest started from downtown Portland, with members marching approximately two miles to the medical center, where they confronted the waiting psychiatrists. The event was widely covered by the local media and newspapers. The result of the protest was a series of meetings between Coalition members and the Department of Psychiatry at Maine Medical Center that lasted over five years and brought improvements in the mental health system. This was the beginning of an organized consumer voice in Maine, where dialogues with mental health professionals soon were also established at the state mental hospital. Peer advocates from the Portland Coalition were accepted at both Maine Medical Center and Augusta Mental Health Institute.

In October 1984, with fifty-five members, the Coalition opened its first office and drop-in center. The event was announced on the front page of the *Portland Evening Express*. In 1985, Dianne Côté, who has a master's degree in education, was elected as the second executive director, and under her leadership the Coalition staged its second public protest. This time it was to combat the lengthy delays, sometimes over a year, in processing Social Security disability claims based on psychiatric disability during the Reagan administration. The demonstrators protested that interminable waiting for SSI (Supplemental Security Income) benefits to be approved makes a person just give up, remain homeless, and leave services. A result of this demonstration was that disability funds were finally released to consumers who had been denied services.

Throughout the Coalition's history, the arts have been essential to our members. The Portland Coalition has published four books of poetry written by members. The first, *Take Horses for Instance*, published in 1983, contains seventy poems written by thirty-five different members.