

Summary of 4-19-06 Meeting with Austin City Council member Betty Dunkerley

I (John Breeding) met with Betty Dunkerley in her City Council Office on Wednesday morning, April 19th for 30 minutes to discuss the CAEST effort to stop electroshock in Austin, beginning with Seton Shoal Creek. I briefly explained to Ms. Dunkerley that CAEST has been in communication so far with the Seton Board, Dr. Whitelock, local legislators, and the Travis County Hospital District. The Council member asked many questions about the numbers of people shocked in Austin, and about issues of safety and efficacy. She expressed the view that since depression was due to some sort of brain damage, it might be justified to allow some risk of ECT-induced brain damage if it helped with the depression, apparently thinking in terms of risk and benefit. I explained our view, based on research and experience, that electroshock is neither safe nor effective.

Ms. Dunkerley said that she did not think this was a city Council issue, that the City Council had no control over Seton, and appeared to agree with Sister Helen Brewer's view that electroshock was a medical operations issue. I told her that we had expressed to Sister Helen that electroshock was a community issue, a public safety issue, and a human rights issue, and that we thought it should be of real concern to the City Council. I mentioned our concern with the Travis County Hospital District funding of Seton Shoal Creek beds in light of the electroshock practice there, and she said those were so that Judge Guy Herman would have a place for more of the involuntary commitments he was ordering. .

Ms. Dunkerley expressed great interest in our recommendation to Seton Shoal Creek that they implement a psychiatric wellness program, allowing for thorough medical evaluation and screening of physical health problems known to cause psychiatric symptomatology. She said her husband was a doctor, and that she had seen examples of mind states altered by medical conditions. I left her with a copy of Peter Breggin's 1998 review article on electroshock, and she said she would make a few calls, including Sister Helen Brewer.