

Dorothea Dix

Appeal on Behalf of the Insane

*The spirit of reform led many Americans, including many middle class women, to devote their lives to improving society. One of the most famous reformers of this era was Dorothea Dix, a teacher from Massachusetts, who committed more than thirty years of her life to improving the treatment of the mentally ill. Dix traveled around the country to expose abuses in insane asylums and similar facilities, and to argue for human care. In this excerpt, Dix makes a successful dramatic appeal to the Massachusetts legislature to provide better facilities for the mentally ill.*

I come to present the strong claims of suffering humanity. I come to place before the Legislature of Massachusetts the condition of the miserable, the desolate, the outcast. I come as the advocate of helpless, forgotten, insane and idiotic men and women; of being sunk to a condition from which the most unconcerned would start with real horror; of beings wretched in our prisons, and more wretched in our almshouses. And I cannot suppose it needful to employ earnest persuasion, or stubborn argument, in order to arrest and fix attention upon a subject only the more strongly pressing in its claims because its revolting and disgusting in its details.

I must confine myself to few examples, but am ready to furnish other and more complete details, if required. If my pictures are displeasing, coarse, and severe, my subjects, it must be recollected, offer no tranquil, refined, or composing features...

I proceed, gentlemen, briefly to call your attention to the present state of insane persons confined within this commonwealth, in cages, closets, cellars, stalls, pens! Chained, naked, beaten with rods, and lashed into obedience...

*Lincoln.* A woman in a cage. *Medford.* One idiotic subject, chained and one in a closed stall for seventeen years. *Pepperell.* One often doubly chained, hand and foot; another violent; several peaceable now. *Brookfield.* One man caged, comfortable. *Granville.* One often closely confined; now losing the use of his limbs from lack of exercise. *Charlemont.* One man caged. *Savoy.* One man caged. *Lenox.* Two in the jail, against whose unfit condition there the jailer protests.

*Deham.* The insane disadvantageously placed in jail. In the almshouse, two females in stalls, situated in the main building; lie in wooden bunks filled with straw; always shut up. One of these subjects is supposed curable. The overseers of the poor have declined giving her a trial at the hospital, as I was informed, on account of expense.

Besides the above, I have seen many who, part of the year, are chained or caged. The use of cages all but universal. Hardly a town but can refer to some not distant period of using them; chains are less common; negligence's frequent; willful abuse less frequent than suffering proceeding from ignorance, or want of consideration. I encountered during the last three months many poor creatures wandering reckless and unprotected through the country. Innumerable accounts have been sent me of persons who had roved away unwatched and unsearched after; and I have heard that responsible persons, controlling the almshouses, have not thought themselves culpable in sending away from their shelter, to cast upon the chances of remote relief, insane men and women. These, left on the highways, unfriended and incompetent to control or direct their own movements, sometimes have found refuge in the hospital, and others have not been traced...

Gentlemen, I commit to you this sacred cause. Your action upon this subject will affect the present and future conditions of hundreds and thousands.