Welcome to the Austen Riggs Center

Intensive psychotherapy in an open and voluntary residential setting
THE AUSTEN RIGGS CENTER (Riggs) is widely recognized for a unique treatment approach offering intensive psychotherapy in a completely open and voluntary setting. Founded in 1919, Riggs today is consistently ranked a U.S. News & World Report “Best Hospital” in Psychiatry. We offer adults with complex psychiatric problems a hospital-based continuum of care that includes inpatient, residential, and day-treatment services.

We treat the individual, not the diagnosis. Patients come to us with multiple diagnoses, often including personality and mood disorders; but we understand that these labels do not necessarily capture the essence of their struggles or strengths.

We offer intensive psychodynamic psychotherapy within a therapeutic community dedicated to the idea of examined living, in which patients and staff discuss the meanings of behaviors, choices, and interactions with one another in open, collaborative ways. Our work is grounded in the perspective that every life has meaning, every person can be understood within a network of relationships, and treatment leads to a more fulfilling life when the sources of suffering are addressed.

Our goal is to help our patients expand their capacity for work, play, and love by helping them acknowledge and come to terms with psychological and biological impediments to development, and by fostering improved self-esteem and resilience.

Many of our patients have not benefited from other forms of treatment, and may be described as “treatment resistant” by the wider psychiatric community. They often come to us needing a new approach. Research suggests that patients not helped in other settings often benefit from our deeper, more thorough psychodynamic evaluation and sustained treatment, reducing the likelihood of re-hospitalization.
Treatment Philosophy

THE AUSTEN RIGGS CENTER is located in the small New England town of Stockbridge, Massachusetts, three hours from New York City, two hours from Boston, and one hour from Albany, New York. The historic buildings that make up the Riggs campus are located along Norman Rockwell’s Main Street.

Patients have their own private rooms and access to a wide variety of amenities, including fitness facilities and a Health and Wellness Program. They may bring their own electronic devices and cars.

Open and Voluntary Setting
Our program is completely open and voluntary. Safety is maintained through patients’ willingness to communicate honestly about their experience rather than through staff management of privilege systems, locks, or restrictions. With this openness comes both considerable freedom and considerable responsibility—for oneself and for others.

Patient Authority
Taking charge of one’s life in a new way requires rediscovering one’s identity beyond a psychiatric diagnosis, and we believe this process often starts with taking charge of the treatment itself.

Our patients collaborate with professional staff to develop individual treatment plans. By working with staff to build and maintain a therapeutic alliance, patients are active participants in their care.

In fact, patients and staff collaborate in running many aspects of the hospital itself, serving together on committees that focus on areas such as our physical campus, the Health and Wellness Program, and dietary services. A patient government system also offers a variety of ways for individuals to contribute to the community and have opportunities for leadership.

Importance of Relationships
Developing fulfilling relationships, a goal for many people who come to Riggs, is an integral part of the treatment program. Working to better understand how they relate to others—including family members, peers, therapists, and other staff—patients experience directly the importance of relationships in their efforts to make lasting change.
Program Highlights

Patients work with the same therapist and multidisciplinary treatment team throughout their stay. The team consists of psychiatrists, psychologists, social workers, nurses, therapeutic community staff, substance abuse counselors, and others, and provides seamless treatment and support throughout our continuum of care.

Intensive Individual Psychodynamic Psychotherapy

Intensive individual psychodynamic psychotherapy four times a week with a psychiatrist or clinical psychologist is the core of our treatment. Through the translation of symptoms into words, therapy helps patients acknowledge, bear, and put into perspective painful life experiences so that they may more freely take charge of their lives.

The supportive and respectful patient-staff community that surrounds this work is essential to its success, as is the practical, behavioral focus of the work with staff in social work, nursing, and other disciplines.

Family Involvement

Families are encouraged to be involved in the treatment process starting from the first contact with admissions staff. Family members can contribute to a more successful treatment by

• understanding the importance of collaboration in managing the potential risks of treatment in an open setting;
• providing a detailed multigenerational family history, which helps in understanding the patient’s central difficulties in a social context; and
• participating in family meetings or family therapy in order to support the patient’s treatment.

A clinical social worker serves as the liaison between the treatment team and family members and assists with discharge planning.

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Psychological Testing
Psychological testing during the initial six-week evaluation and treatment period provides an in-depth assessment and formulation of complex psychological problems and individual strengths, and is used to inform treatment.

Psychodynamic Psychopharmacology
Many of our patients take medication as part of their treatment. Each patient is an active participant in assessing the effectiveness of his or her medication regimen. Psychodynamic psychopharmacology attends to non-pharmacologic sources of treatment resistance by examining a person’s relationships to medications and to his or her prescriber. It addresses the meaning of symptoms and translates the communication that is often embedded in treatment resistance.

Nursing
Members of the nursing staff provide round-the-clock support. Each patient has a nursing care coordinator who offers understanding and guidance in managing daily life at Riggs. Nurses offer education and assistance with medication management, assessment and intervention in crises, and encouragement in developing relationships with others. Patients use their relationships with nursing staff in many different ways—to help bear difficult feelings, to recognize and change repetitive, self-defeating patterns of behavior, or to manage personal space and hygiene. Because nursing staff members get to know patients so well, they are often the first to notice when someone is becoming distressed and can intervene flexibly to prevent or respond to crises. Equally important, they are available informally, at meals and coffee hours, and in common areas between meetings, fostering a relaxed and welcoming environment. In addition to acting as patient advocates, nursing staff members are participants in the Therapeutic Community Program and, like all staff, work in a partnership with patients to help create a safe therapeutic environment.

Activities Program
Our Activities Program offers patients the chance to become students in creative enterprises—working with professional artists and craftspeople in woodworking, ceramics, fiber arts, visual arts, and theatre—as well as opportunities in our greenhouse and nursery school. The teacher-student relationship helps patients develop their strengths and discover new ways to express themselves.

Therapeutic Community
Our Therapeutic Community Program is based on the notion of examined living—a careful exploration of difficult life experiences that works best when patients share their strengths with each other and with the staff in a serious partnership of mutual problem solving and social learning. Everyone in the community—patients and staff alike—has something to offer and something to gain by participating. The program includes an interconnected series of groups aimed at:
- enhancing patient authority;
- fostering interpersonal learning; and
- creating an environment that supports treatment.

With nearly 50 group meetings and activities each week, patients have myriad opportunities to deepen their understanding of how different ways of communicating affect the quality of relationships. Patients choose to participate in different groups and activities, and if they find their interests are not being served by existing groups, they can join together to create a new one.

Through our Health and Wellness Program, patients can strengthen their overall health and well-being through such offerings as health education, instruction in mindfulness and mind-body practices, personal training, exercise classes, daily walks, and nutrition education and counseling.

Substance Abuse Services
Substance abuse services are utilized by the nearly half of our patients who have significant substance abuse histories. Although Riggs does not provide primary treatment for substance abuse or dependence, our range of services supports our patients’ commitment to maintaining abstinence.

Medical Care
Medical care is offered by an on-site internist who provides medical consultation, diagnosis, and treatment as needed. When appropriate, we can call on other specialists through a list of approved consultants.

Resource Management
Resource management can be an important part of the treatment itself. Patients, families, and business and clinical staff come together to attend to limitations in financial resources and to plan treatment goals achievable within these limitations.

Program Highlights
Our nursing staff fosters a relaxed and welcoming environment.

Everyone in the community—patients and staff alike—has something to offer and something to gain by participating.
Admissions Process

Patients come to us voluntarily, often through a referral from a mental health professional. The admissions process involves a series of steps that begins the first time our admissions office is contacted.

By speaking to the prospective patient, family members, and the referring clinician(s), admissions staff members gather relevant clinical and financial information to assess whether or not our treatment approach is appropriate.

The prospective patient and his or her family are invited to come to Riggs for an in-person admissions consultation. Most of the time, this results in the prospective patient being offered admission.

Because of our small size, we often maintain a waiting list, so there may be some time between an initial contact and admission.

Patients who come to Riggs must be at least 18 years old and cannot be under a guardianship or medical power of attorney. We ask all prospective patients to abstain from drugs and alcohol at the initiation of the admissions process.

Cost of Treatment and Insurance Coverage

We are committed to working with patients and their families to develop the most cost-effective course of treatment available.

Health insurance plans often provide limited benefits for psychiatric treatment, and few plans provide benefits that reimburse all of the expenses of long-term treatment at residential programs like the Austen Riggs Center.

We do not contract with any insurance company and are not a Medicare or Medicaid provider. However, more than a third of our patients use insurance coverage for all or part of the cost of their treatment. Our staff can assist in determining available insurance benefits. In addition, we offer fee reductions up to 30% based on financial need.
Length of Stay

**ALL PATIENTS ARE ADMITTED** to a period of intensive evaluation and treatment that is generally completed in six weeks and culminates in a case conference. At this two-hour meeting, clinical staff gather to meet with the patient, hear about the work so far, review initial assessments, and make recommendations consistent with the patient’s goals.

The first six weeks is also a time for new patients to settle in, discover which aspects of the program are best suited to their needs, get to know other members of the community, and begin allowing themselves to be known.

After the initial six weeks, most patients continue in treatment within our full continuum of care. While the length of stay varies, generally a third of our patients stay up to 3 months, a third between 3 and 10 months, and a third more than 10 months.

Continuum of Care

**WE OFFER A FULL CONTINUUM OF CARE** for patients who have completed the initial six-week evaluation and treatment period. Patients work with their individual therapist and multidisciplinary treatment team to step down to lower levels of care located on or near the Riggs campus as they begin to return to the outside community. Patients continue with their therapist throughout our continuum of care.

**Elms Transition Program** focuses on developing peer relationships and personal resources to help patients contain and learn from their experience.

**Elms Residential Program** assists with the development of interpersonal and independent living skills.

**Lavan Residential Program** encourages its residents to function as a working unit and to develop interpersonal and relationship skills.

**Main Street Program** offers support in developing social competence through involvement in work, school, volunteering, or re-engagement with family.

**Lavan Apartment Program** is a shared apartment with minimal staffing, where the focus is on consolidating the skills required to live independently and to engage in activities outside of Riggs.

**Day Treatment** allows for access to groups, activities, and a supportive interpersonal network while living independently in the local community and maintaining treatment at Riggs.

**Aftercare** is a transitional phase for those ending their treatment at Riggs that maintains individual treatment services without participation in other programs.
A successful transition to an outpatient or other setting is an important part of the treatment process.

Our active alumni community of former patients (at least one year post-discharge), staff, and Trustees convenes every three years for an alumni reunion, and all alumni have access to a protected online community.

People often leave Riggs feeling more accepting of themselves and others. They have greater freedom to work, play, and love. And they have learned new methods for overcoming obstacles that may arise in the future.

Our Values

- Affirmation of the dignity and responsibility of the individual
- Recognition, appreciation, and enhancement of individual strengths
- Importance of human relationships
- Respect for individual differences
- Centrality of the psychotherapeutic relationship
- Learning opportunities in a community of differentiated voices
- Importance of examined living
- Attention to the conflict between individual choice and the requirements of a community
- Openness to innovation and creativity
- Open setting to promote personal responsibility and freedom of choice in treatment
- Importance of recognizing and preserving multiple roles, including those of student and community member
- Provision of treatment based on quality and outcome, not profit