Milestones
In an increasingly complex and fragmented world, the dignity of the individual, the importance of human relationships and the centrality of a sense of community are more difficult to find. The focus and traditions of the Austen Riggs Center orient the staff to help troubled patients meet these and other rapidly changing psychological challenges of contemporary society. We will continually build on our distinguished past, helping our patients develop personal competence in a completely open setting that emphasizes the individual’s capacity to face and take responsibility for his or her life—past, present, and future. We nurture our patients’ strengths, foster their social functioning and encourage family collaboration. Through our research and training programs, we educate professionals in our psychodynamic perspective, applying this learning to a broad range of psychosocial problems. Finally, in this time of diminishing mental health benefits, we will continue to develop cost-effective treatment settings that focus on individual psychotherapy, community living and that attend to resource limitations as both reality to deal with and metaphor for other limits and losses.

The Austen Riggs Center is a vital therapeutic community, open psychiatric hospital, and institute for education and research. Our mission is to promote resilience and self-direction in those with complex psychiatric problems—to help people take charge of their lives. Our work is grounded in the conviction that an individual’s problems are inherently meaningful, that such problems are best understood in a social context, and that treatment leads to a more fulfilling life when the sources of suffering are addressed.

**Mission**

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**Vision**

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**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

**Open Setting**

Central to the Riggs philosophy is the open setting in which patients are free to come and go as they please. In the open setting there are neither restraints nor seclusion, and each patient is afforded full civil rights. Informed by the success of the patient governance initiatives of the 1950s, Riggs developed a unique “therapeutic milieu” emphasizing the practice of “examined living” that promotes both personal and social learning. It is sometimes stressful and challenging as patients learn to balance their freedom at Riggs with safety, their responsibility as individuals, and their role as members of a community. Years of clinical experience, however, have shown that the open setting positively impacts the process of understanding the meaning of one’s behaviors. The open setting is a vital tool for helping patients engage fully in their recovery process.

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**In Norse mythology, the Fenris Wolf sought to bring about the end of the world, and was only contained by gossamer threads of intangibles, not chains.**

Like the myth of Fenris, Riggs has recognized that only the intangibles, the bonds of human relationships, of words and understanding, may be strong enough to contain the destructive forces operating in many of our patients.

(Image: Fenris Wolf myth painted-wood puzzle created in 2016 by Austen Riggs Center Activities Program staff and pieced together by staff and patients.)
1907 - Austen Fox Riggs arrives in Stockbridge, MA.

1912 - Austen Fox Riggs publishes his most influential work, the Talks to Patients series, which considers different aspects of mental health.

1920 - The Riggs Clinic, led by renowned social worker Anna King opened in Pittsfield, MA, to provide free and low-cost consultation services and psychotherapy, laying the foundation for what would become the Brien Center.

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1947 - Robert Knight arrives from the Menninger Clinic in Topeka, KS, to become the medical director of Riggs and assembles a team of leaders that eventually includes Margaret Breman-Gibson, Cyrus Friedman, David Rapaport, and Erik Erikson (pictured below).

1951 - Noted psychoanalyst Erik Erikson and his wife Joan arrive at Riggs. Erik brings a perspective that people cannot be understood outside their social and historical context, and Joan formalizes a vibrant arts program that, to this day, serves as a space where patients learn as students from professional artisans.

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1967 - Otto Will, coming from Chestnut Lodge in Rockville, MD, becomes the medical director of Riggs and is instrumental in expanding Riggs’ treatment to include patients with more severe mental disturbance.

1973 - The Health Maintenance Organization (HMO) Act allows medical care services to be performed on a for-profit basis.

1978 - Daniel Schwartz becomes the medical director of Riggs and builds upon the strengths of Riggs’ psychoanalytically based long-term treatment program during the rise of managed care.

1980 - DSM-III, a publication of the American Psychiatric Association (APA) that seeks to classify mental disorders, is released. This version takes a more biological approach to classification, marking a shift in clinical psychiatry.

1980 - Austen Riggs Center’s approach to treatment becomes one of psychoanalytic pluralism based on openness to new developments in the field. Medication is integrated into the treatment of patients where indicated.

1994 - Riggs establishes the Erikson Institute for Education and Research to sustain training opportunities and provide an intellectual home for professional education and clinical research. Gary Fromm is the first director, followed by current director Jane Tillman.

2007 - The Edward R. Shapiro Community Center opens, affirming the centrality of the therapeutic community as part of treatment.

1991 - Ed Shapiro becomes the medical director of Riggs; he brings families more into the treatment process, expands the social work department, and develops the step-down programs as part of a full continuum of care.

2008 - The Mental Health Parity and Addictions Equity Act is signed into law. It requires that mental illness be treated and funded on an equal basis to medical and surgical disorders.

2010 - President Barack Obama signs the Affordable Care Act, greatly increasing the availability of health insurance including coverage for mental health and substance use disorders.

2010 - President John F. Kennedy signs the Community Mental Health Act, deinstitutionalizing many mentally ill patients.

1999 - Riggs is named a Best Hospital in Psychiatry by U.S. News & World Report for the first time; since 2013, it has consistently ranked in the top ten.

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And Beyond...

Though there is still much to be learned, new developments in psychoanalytic and psychiatric research and treatment methods are continually enhancing our knowledge of how to best help those suffering from mental illness. Focusing on providing help to patients troubled by the psychological challenges of the complex and fragmentary contemporary world, the Austen Riggs Center remains dedicated to the psychotherapeutic process, the dignity of individuals, and the centrality of relationships and community.
About the Austen Riggs Center
Now in its centennial year, the Austen Riggs Center, located in Stockbridge, MA, is a leading psychiatric hospital and residential treatment program that has been serving adults since 1919. Within an open setting, patients participate in an intensive treatment milieu that emphasizes respectful engagement. Individual psychodynamic psychotherapy is provided four times a week by doctors on staff. The Erikson Institute for Education and Research of the Austen Riggs Center studies individuals in their social contexts through research, training, education, and outreach programs in the local community and beyond. Riggs is ranked a top-ten “Best Hospital in Psychiatry” by U.S. News & World Report.