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Va. Apologizes To the Victims Of Sterilizations

By William Branigin
Washington Post Staff Writer
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Virginia Gov. Mark R. Warner (D) formally apologized yesterday for the state's embrace of eugenics, denouncing a practice under which some 8,000 people were involuntarily sterilized from 1927 until as recently as 1979.

"The eugenics movement was a shameful effort in which state government never should have been involved," Warner said in offering the "commonwealth's sincere apology."

The governor's statement, which came on the 75th anniversary of a Supreme Court decision that upheld the state's 1924 eugenics statute, was read at a ceremony in Charlottesville honoring the first person sterilized under that law. It marked the first time that a U.S. governor has formally apologized for eugenics, a practice that was adopted by 30 states and resulted in the involuntary sterilization of an estimated 65,000 Americans. Most of the procedures predated World War II and were intended to prevent those considered genetically "unfit" from passing on their traits to future generations.

Eugenics, a term meaning well-born, was an influential concept in the early 20th century, leading not only to forced sterilizations but to social legislation aimed at keeping racial and ethnic groups separate and restricting immigration from Southern and Eastern Europe. According to a 1914 "model eugenical sterilization law" promoted by an advocacy group and later adopted as the basis for Virginia's law, targets of the sterilization effort were the "feebleminded, insane, criminalistic, epileptic, inebriate, diseased, blind, deaf, deformed and dependent," including "orphans, ne'er-do-wells, tramps, the homeless and paupers."

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The American eugenics movement became something of a model for Adolf Hitler and Nazi Germany, "whose racial adaptation of eugenics culminated in the Holocaust," according to the U.S. National DNA Learning Center, a eugenics

research group in Cold Spring Harbor, N.Y.

Although the movement was widely discredited after World War II and the 1927 Supreme Court decision upholding forced sterilization has come to be seen as a low point in U.S. jurisprudence, the ruling remains in effect and was cited as recently as last year in a case in Missouri, said Paul A. Lombardo, a eugenics expert at the University of Virginia's Center for Biomedical Ethics.

The number of sterilizations in Virginia was exceeded only by California, which sterilized about 20,000 people. Neither Maryland nor the District adopted eugenics laws.

In Charlottesville yesterday, two Virginians who underwent involuntary sterilizations helped unveil a highway marker honoring Carrie Buck, an unwed mother who was 17 when she became the first person forcibly sterilized under the 1924 law. In *Buck v. Bell*, she sued to overturn the law, but the Supreme Court ruled 8 to 1 in favor of the statute.

Calling Buck "the probable potential parent of socially inadequate offspring," Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr. wrote for the majority: "It is better for all the world, if instead of waiting to execute degenerate offspring for crime, or to let them starve for their imbecility, society can prevent those who are manifestly unfit from continuing their kind. . . . Three generations of imbeciles are enough."

Holmes based his view on testimony that Buck and her mother, both committed to the Virginia Colony for Epileptics and the Feebleminded in Lynchburg, were mentally deficient and promiscuous for bearing children out of wedlock. In addition, Carrie Buck's child, Vivian, was judged to be "feebleminded" when she was 7 months old.

In fact, however, Carrie Buck had been raped by a nephew of her foster parents and was institutionalized to avoid further shame to the family, said Lombardo, who is writing a book about the case. Neither she nor her daughter had any mental disability, and Vivian Buck made her school's honor roll in 1931, a year before she died of an intestinal illness at age 8, Lombardo said. Carrie Buck died in 1983.

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Yahres (D-Charlottesville), sponsor of a General Assembly resolution last year that expressed regret over Virginia's role in eugenics -- making it the first state to do so -- presented a copy of his resolution to the principal of the nearby Venable School, which Vivian Buck attended.

In the crowd were Jesse Meadows and Rose Brooks, two of several dozen surviving victims of the eugenics policy. Meadows, of Lynchburg, told reporters that he was sent to the Virginia Colony and sterilized in the late 1950s after his mother died and he had a falling out with his stepmother.

Raymond Hudlow, 76, was sterilized at the Virginia Colony when he was 16 after running away from an abusive father. He went on to become a decorated World War II veteran. The Campbell County man was honored Wednesday at a ceremony in Lynchburg.

"I'm not mad at anyone. I just lived with it," he told the Richmond Times-Dispatch. But he said: "I hope it never again happens to any other child. It is horrible. You have no children. No family. . . . It will remain in the back of my mind for the rest of my life."

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