

## Hundreds rally for mental health housing



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Almost a thousand people showed up in Albany last Tuesday to participate in what the New York State Campaign for Mental Health Housing called the largest rally for a mental health cause in state history.

Attendees filled the well of the Legislative Office Building yelling "size matters" in an attempt to persuade Gov. Eliot Spitzer to set aside \$100 million in the 2007-08 budget for mental health housing.

Mental Health advocates from all over the state gathered in the Legislative Office Building and then outside of the Capitol to show support for their cause. Steve Coe, chairman of the New York State Campaign for Mental Health Housing, which represents tens of thousands of mental health consumers, providers, family members and advocates, outlined their proposals for the \$100 million.



A number of supporters, including several elected officials, spoke on the need for more housing resources.

"This is great," Sen. Paul Tonko yelled to a sea of supporters who spilled down the marble staircase and filled the well of the Legislative Office Building. This is "what's fair, what's right, what's necessary," he exclaimed.

Bright green t-shirts with the words New York State Campaign for Mental Health Housing peppered the halls of the Empire State Plaza Concourse for hours as attendees made their presence known in the Capitol.

"Preserve, reform, develop!" was shouted by rally members as a concise description of what they hope to achieve.

In addition to the lobbyists request for the development of 35,000 units of supported housing they want to preserve 30,000 existing housing units. Another request made by the group was the reform of existing housing to provide better service to occupants.

Antonia Lasicki, executive director of the Association for Community Living, said reform is necessary in existing housing because they "have been under funded year after year since 1984. We need to reform residence modules that were created in the 80s and are no longer responsive to all the consumers in the system." She also added "There are thousands of people in shelters, on the streets, in hospitals who could live successfully in the community if we had the right supports."

Lasicki's claim is an important feature of the University of Pennsylvania study that suggests shuffling people from hospitals to shelters can be expensive for taxpayers. Copies of statistics from the study were included as handouts that stated it would only cost an extra \$995 per year to offer appropriate housing downstate and even less Upstate.

"It's the humane thing to do and it's the cost-effective thing do," said J. David Seay, executive director of the National Alliance of Mental Illness – New York State. Seay also pointed to the fact that recovery for the mentally ill is possible for even severe cases "though it isn't possible to achieve any significant form of recovery if you don't have a place to live."

Assemblyman Jim Brennan, D-Brooklyn, who showed up to the event proclaimed, "over the past 12 years because of rallies like this... you succeeded over the negligence of the Pataki administration. But the fight is far from over."

The mental health community has made advances attaining supportive housing in recent years with victories such as the NYNYI and NYNYII initiatives that brought supportive housing units to New York City. However, the New York State Campaign for Mental Health Housing maintains that 35,000 units of supportive housing are needed statewide.

Former Gov. George Pataki vetoed a bill commonly known as “the wait bill” last year that would make the state responsible for generating a waiting list for people in need of supportive housing, even though it passed in both houses. It would provide more accurate statistics than those available now.

Sen. Tom Morahan, R,C,I,WF-New City, chairman of the Senate mental health committee, said he filed the bill last Monday hoping to get it in early. He suggested concerns about the “quality of reporting” might have been a deterrent for the former governor, but stated “It is my intention to get this bill out in a form that will meet the needs of the legislative branch.”

The Rally culminated in a speech on the steps of the Capitol building where mentally ill individuals described the experience of being placed in inadequate housing as being “railroaded” or “warehoused.”

Following the speech, rally members marched around the building and through the Justice building in a final act of support before leaving Albany.

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