

Mental Health Advocates Want Gov. Candidates to Join Their Fight

By AMY BURGER Legislative Gazette October 10, 2006

Several organizations, including the New York State Campaign for Mental Health Housing and the League of Women Voters, observed Mental Health Week last Wednesday by calling for all gubernatorial candidates to support reform of the state's mental health housing programs.

Steven R. Coe, founding member and chairman of the New York State Campaign for Mental Health Housing said, "Estimates are that more than 70,000 people with mental illnesses lack access to appropriate housing, and this number is growing."

The groups, which include the families of people with mental illnesses, have a four-point plan aimed at redirecting resources that currently go to expensive emergency services in order to address the shortage of housing over the next 10 years for people with mental illnesses once they are discharged from a psychiatric hospital.

The plan includes: reforming existing programs, preserving the approximately 30,000 existing units of licensed housing, developing 35,000 new units and creating a mental health housing waiting list to assess patients' unmet needs.

Coe called on all gubernatorial candidates to consider adding the reform proposals to their political platforms.

"This is a fixable problem," said Coe. "The resources just need to be redirected to save people's lives and allow people to go back into the community."

According to Coe, mental health patients who are discharged without a place to live primarily end up in shelters, which are not set up to meet their needs, or in jail.

Reform legislation the groups support was passed in both the Senate and the Assembly, but was vetoed by Gov. George E. Pataki.

Coe said he hopes the Legislature will come back and override the veto. If that doesn't happen, he plans to fight to have the reform proposal re-introduced next year under the new governor.

"Both candidates have talked about making a more efficient system of government, and this certainly fits into that parameter," said League of Woman Voters of New York State Legislative Director Barbara Bartoletti, of gubernatorial hopefuls Republican John Faso and Democrat Eliot Spitzer.

"We not only need efficient social policies, but humane social policies," Bartoletti said.

"Situations like these are all too common and troubling," said Roy Neville, treasurer of the National Alliance on Mental Illness in Schenectady. "It's a statewide problem that doesn't even have to exist — we have the resources. The next governor has to make an effort to reform mental health housing."

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