

Since Kendra's Law

Journal News October 16, 2006

It has been almost eight years since an aspiring screenwriter from upstate Fredonia met a gruesome end, pushed in front of a Manhattan subway train by a mentally ill Andrew Goldstein. Last week, after earlier trials in which Goldstein's lawyers argued he was too mentally ill to understand the consequences of his actions, the sometimes-violent, often-homeless schizophrenic pleaded guilty to manslaughter. The younger sister of Kendra Webdale said the family was provided closure.

Because of the high-profile crime - Kendra was 32, blonde and pretty - New York state passed "Kendra's Law," one of the earliest pieces of victim-named legislation in New York. State legislators were eager to support Kendra's Law, and it was signed into law by Gov. George Pataki the year Webdale died.

Kendra's Law allows latitude for family members to request, and mental-health authorities to ensure, closer supervision of psychiatric patients who live outside institutions. After due process, such patients can be required to take prescribed medications and undergo treatment. Five years after enactment, the law has helped about 4,000 people, experts estimate. The National Alliance for the Mentally Ill heralded New York Kendra's Law as an innovation.

Notwithstanding the landmark measure, services for the mentally ill in New York remain a mixed bag; tens of thousands of mentally ill New Yorkers have been identified in need of services, and thousands of others are believed to be "outside the system" and also requiring help. Relatedly, a weak version of Timothy's Law, which aims to make mental-health services more available through insurance, passed only the state Senate late in the recent legislative session - in time for the fall election but too late for the Assembly to debate, the governor to sign or patients to benefit this year.

Family services for ill parents or children with psychiatric, emotional or behavioral problems are fractured or, in many parts of the state, non-existent. Prisons are filled with mentally ill people who receive inadequate treatment. The public and Legislature focused on civil

confinement and treatment for sex offenders after the 2005 slaying of a White Plains office worker by an ex-convict, but blame games prevented a bill to be adopted by both the Assembly and Senate.

In a Journal News article last week, the Campaign for Mental Health Housing estimated that more than 70,000 people with mental illnesses lack access to appropriate housing, and the number is growing. The coalition wants the state to redirect money and resources that currently go to expensive emergency services - or incarceration of the mentally ill - to preserve and upgrade about 30,000 existing units of supportive and licensed housing, and develop at least 35,000 new units over the next 10 years.

The campaign also wants New York to set up a mental-health housing waiting list to assess unmet needs; a bill that would have done just that was vetoed by Pataki in mid-August. At his sentencing tomorrow, Andrew Goldstein is expected to receive a term of 23 years in prison, plus five years of post-release supervision. Kendra Webdale's killer, at least, will be housed a long time, maybe get some treatment and, if and when he leaves prison, be watched for a while.