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More housing urged for mentally ill

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ALBANY — Mental-health advocates yesterday asked gubernatorial candidates to pledge they would expand the number of housing units for people with serious psychiatric disabilities.

It can cost more than \$300,000 per person each year for housing in what most people would consider unfortunate circumstances, such as a hospital bed or a prison cell, said Barbara Bartoletti of the League of Women Voters, a member of the New York State Campaign for Mental Health Housing.

"We certainly call on both candidates to think seriously about this plan as they talk about not only efficient and effective social policy for New Yorkers but certainly humane social policy for New Yorkers," Bartoletti said.

Republican John Faso's campaign met with members of the coalition yesterday, spokeswoman Susan Del Percio said. She did not say specifically whether Faso would back all aspects of the coalition's plan but said Faso would talk with the groups about reform if elected. "They raised some very serious concerns and addressed the need for reform, which as governor John Faso would support," she said.

A spokeswoman for Democratic gubernatorial candidate Eliot Spitzer did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

The Campaign for Mental Health Housing estimates that more than 70,000 people with mental illnesses lack access to appropriate housing, and the number is growing, said Steve Coe, chairman of the coalition and executive director of Community Access in New York City.

The campaign wants the state to redirect money and resources that currently go to expensive emergency services, he said. Advocates are calling for

- Preserving about 30,000 existing units of supportive and licensed housing for the mentally ill. Additional services are provided in this type of housing, such as crisis counseling.
- Developing at least 35,000 new units statewide over the next 10 years.
- Setting up a mental-health housing waiting list to assess the unmet need.

Also yesterday, a new Quinnipiac University poll showed that Spitzer has widened his lead over Faso to more than 50 percentage points, setting the stage for what could be an unprecedented runaway election. Among registered voters,

- About 70,000 are in need of supportive housing, including more than 10,000 who are homeless, more than 7,000 who live with aging parents and more than 12,000 who live in adult homes or group homes.

- Each year, 1,500 youths with mental illnesses leave foster care to become homeless.

- At least 8,000 people with mental illnesses are released from jail each year without adequate housing.

- Thousands of hospital patients await discharge with no place to go.

Spitzer leads 69 percent to 18 percent, compared with a 65-17 spread in the last Quinnipiac poll.

Faso is battling an anonymity quotient, said Maurice Carroll, director of the Quinnipiac University Polling Institute. Seventy-three percent of those polled didn't know enough about him to form an opinion.

Faso is a former Assembly minority leader from rural Columbia County and hasn't held any high-profile state positions like Spitzer, the attorney general.

When asked about the comptroller's race, 59 percent of respondents said they favored Comptroller Alan Hevesi, a Democrat in his first term, and 21 percent said they would vote for Republican J. Christopher Callaghan, former Saratoga County treasurer. Nearly 90 percent said they didn't know enough about Callaghan to have an opinion of him.

Thirty-seven percent said they approved of Hevesi's job performance, down from 45 percent in a June Quinnipiac poll. Twenty-three percent did not approve of his performance, and 40 percent did not know.
