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State to Survey Mentally Ill In Residences

By CLIFFORD J. LEVY

Teams of mental health workers are to be dispatched to New York State's adult homes in the coming months to evaluate 15,000 mentally ill residents and determine whether they can be resettled in smaller, better-managed facilities.

The project begins what the Pataki administration is pledging to be an ambitious effort to overhaul and eventually do away with the adult homes system, which has long been considered something of a dumping ground for psychiatric patients discharged from state hospitals.

Albany has never done an examination of who lives in the homes in the three-decade history of the system, officials said. Mental health experts said the project, which is expected to last more than a year and cost several million dollars, was a highly unusual attempt by a state to survey its mentally ill population. In all, teams of nurses and social workers are to assess and file reports on residents at more than 100 adult homes around New York.

"It is our expectation that the assessments will reveal that most of the residents of adult homes can, and should, be served in non-institutional settings," said Jeanette Zelhof, managing attorney for MFY Legal Services, a nonprofit group in Manhattan that represents adult home residents.

But even as the Pataki administration undertakes the project, it has yet to disclose how it is to finance any new housing for the residents. Its long-term plan, announced in a report last month by an administration task force, calls for the creation of at least 6,000 housing units so residents can be moved and what remains of the system can be revamped, with the homes scaled back sharply in size.

Administration officials have said only that they will present more details on their housing proposals when Gov. George E. Pataki releases his budget early next year. And Robert C. Kenny, a spokesman for the State Health Department, emphasized that assessments had to be conducted first before a final plan can be adopted. "Once they are complete, we will be able to better determine the housing needs of this population," Mr. Kenny said.

The reform panel, which was led by senior administration officials and members of advocacy groups, was established by the governor last spring after a series of articles in The New York Times detailed extensive neglect and malfeasance in the adult homes.

The housing is expected to cost hundreds of millions of dollars over the next decade. The panel called for offering residents several options, including small group homes or apartments, supervised by nonprofit groups, in residential buildings. Many adult homes in the city have more than 125 beds, and facilities that large are now widely considered by mental health experts to be poor settings for the mentally ill.

The panel made a plea in the report for top state officials to acknowledge that overhauling the system could no longer be delayed. It also pointed out that some proposals would not necessarily cost the state more money if existing programs were rethought.

"The time to offer this population timely, appropriate and cost-effective housing, services and health care is long overdue," the report said. "Sufficient public resources are currently being spent which, if spent more efficiently and effectively, could generate a high quality of life and quality of care for a long-overlooked segment of the population of vulnerable New Yorkers."

Operators of the homes, who were represented on the reform panel, ended up essentially boycotting the final report. They criticized the panel for not endorsing efforts to raise the fees they receive from the state to house, feed and supervise residents, currently \$28 a day per person. And they expressed skepticism that the housing recommended in the report would be created.

The Democratic majority in the State Assembly, whose leaders have repeatedly criticized Mr. Pataki's oversight of the homes, has not issued a formal response to the report. Assemblyman Richard N. Gottfried of Manhattan, chairman of the Assembly Health Committee, said the Democrats wanted to scrutinize the governor's budget first before presenting their own proposals.

In addition to convening the reform panel, the administration has also stepped up its enforcement efforts in recent months. The Health Department said it had conducted 515 inspections of adult homes in the state this year as of Sept. 30, and it cited violations during 365 of them. It has referred 57 adult homes to enforcement proceedings and levied a total of \$108,775 in fines against 16 homes.

While remaining silent about long-term proposals, senior administration officials have told members of the reform panel that they have begun identifying millions of dollars in the current budget that are to be used to begin financing a range of short-term efforts recommended in the panel's report. Those include the assessments and measures to station nurses and other mental health workers permanently in the homes to distribute medication and improve oversight of residents.

The state health commissioner, Dr. Antonia C. Novello, has personally contacted nursing schools in order to recruit nurses for the homes, officials said.

The administration has hired the New York-Presbyterian Healthcare Network to help conduct the first assessments at homes in the city, probably starting next month, officials said.

Nurses and social workers will interview residents individually and examine their mental health and medical records, seeking to assess the severity of their illnesses and whether they can undertake a range of activities, from dressing themselves to using mass transit to holding jobs.

The teams will eventually visit Brooklyn Manor, King Solomon Manor in Queens, New Monsey Park in Rockland County and numerous other adult homes where inspection reports have for years criticized conditions and supervision.

For the residents, many of whom have languished in the homes for years, the interviews will often represent the first time that the state has paid significant attention to their needs.

"Without these assessments, reformers won't know what to do," said Karen Schimke, a panel member and former senior Pataki administration official who is president of the Schuyler Center for Analysis and Advocacy in Albany. "The surest way to close down reform is to lack the information with which to

carry it out."

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