

Advocates push for affordable housing for mentally ill

Cara Matthews
Albany bureau

(April 25, 2006) — ALBANY — Advocates and lawmakers are pushing the state to set up a waiting list for mentally ill residents who need housing and develop at least 35,000 units for them within 10 years.

Tens of thousands of state residents with serious psychiatric disabilities don't have access to affordable housing and their quality of life has suffered, members of a new coalition, the New York State Campaign for Mental Health Housing, said Monday. New York spends millions each year on services that don't help this population long term, they said, such as shelters, hospitals, adult homes and prisons.

"We can't achieve any of the goals that all of us collectively need to accomplish unless we know what's out there, unless we know what the need is, unless we know what the cost is, and we won't know that unless we do enact this bill into law," said Senate Mental Health Committee Chairman Thomas Morahan, R-New City, Rockland County.

Assembly Mental Health Chairman Peter Rivera, D-New York City, is sponsoring the legislation in his house.

The groups estimate that New York has about 30,000 units of supportive-housing — meaning additional services are provided, such as crisis counseling and job training — and there is a need for some 70,000. About half the beds would be in New York City, said Toni Lasicki, executive director of the Association for Community Living. New York City recently received word it would get 5,550 more, she said, so that would leave a need for 14,450 more units there and 20,000 more elsewhere.

A 2001 University of Pennsylvania study found that it would cost only \$995 more a year to house homeless people with serious mental illness in New York City and provide them with services than to leave them homeless — \$40,499 compared with \$41,494. When people have safe housing, they decrease their use of shelters, psychiatric institutions and other hospitals, and prisons, which are costly, the report said.

The cost would be lower outside of New York City, and it could vary depending on the intensity of services needed and other factors, advocates noted. The initial investment would be \$100 million a year.

"Doing nothing basically is very expensive and it's a tremendous Medicaid cost to the counties because people are winding up in emergency hospitals waiting rooms and in psychiatric hospitals for one-month hospitalizations that then get repeated again," said Steve Coe, executive director of New York City-based Community Access, which provides housing and advocacy for people with psychiatric disabilities.

The state has been a national leader in developing community housing for people with mental illness, said Jill Daniels, a spokeswoman for the state Office of Mental Health. The state has 27,500 beds with 3,600 more being developed. That does not include the additional 5,550 units for New York City, she said.

In the past few years, the state has allocated \$13 million for rent stipend increases, she said.

CLMATTHE@Gannett.com