

## Advocates say more affordable housing needed for mentally ill



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An alliance of mental health advocates is attempting to find a solution for the lack of community housing for New Yorkers with mental illnesses and is supporting legislation being sponsored by allies in the Legislature.

"The new campaign is dedicated to ensuring that people of all ages living with serious mental illnesses in New York State have access to safe, affordable housing and the opportunity for an active life in the community," said Steve Coe at a recent press conference. Coe is New York State Campaign for Mental Health Housing's executive director of community access and chairman for the campaign.

The Campaign for Mental Health Housing consists of more than 50 organizations that have come together to ask state government to help solve what they call a housing crisis in New York. They want to see the state make plans to provide more supportive housing for the mentally ill and establish a waiting list for those seeking community housing and support services.

According to Coe, there are more than 40,000 people using emergency services in the state, and the push to make more supportive housing available could create huge savings for New York by reducing many of those emergency visits.

A May 2001 University of Pennsylvania study found that just \$995 more a year would have to be spent to enact the campaign's plan. Their figures compare the net cost of supportive housing, including purchasing property in New York City and financing construction, and services to assist the mentally ill in recovering and returning to the community.

The campaign's efforts are being presented in conjunction with a bipartisan bill sponsored by Sen. Thomas Morahan, R-New City, and Assemblyman Peter Rivera, D-Bronx. Morahan chairs the Senate mental health and developmental disabilities committee, and Rivera is chairman of the mental health committee in the Assembly. The bill would establish waiting lists for people with serious mental illnesses seeking housing and services.

The local service providers who make referrals for patients to participate in community housing would be mandated to update the Office of Mental Health rosters monthly for those waiting to be placed in limited beds.

According to Toni Lasicki, executive director for the Association for Community Living, there are approximately 30,000 supportive housing units in the state and about 5,000 would be added in the next five years, though it would take 60,000 total units to meet the state's needs.

"We can't achieve any of the goals that we 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," Morahan said, "and we won't know that unless we enact this bill into law."

Morahan said the passing of his legislation would force Albany to take notice of the obligation the state has to help the mentally ill find affordable homes.

On the line in the current budget battle is more than \$1.6 million designated for housing throughout the state. But to be sure the money is spent properly, the campaign and Morahan say the waiting list should be established to help the state best allocate the funds. The bill, should it pass in both houses and win the governor's approval, would take effect immediately.

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