

**Housing Wait List to be Created for Mentally Ill**

By HEMA EASLEY THE JOURNAL NEWS June 24, 2006

The New York state Legislature has passed a bill requiring counties to create a waiting list for housing for the mentally ill, a move that would push officials to document the number of people with psychiatric conditions who need to live in an integrated, safe environment.

"New York created a waiting list bill for individuals with developmental disabilities. This list ultimately played a major role in the creation of the nationally recognized New York Cares housing program for individuals with developmental disabilities," said state Sen. Thomas P. Morahan, R-New City, who introduced the bill. "I am pleased we were able to pass legislation to do the same thing for individuals with mental illness."

The bill, passed Thursday, requires the governor's approval.

Currently there is no data on the subject, Morahan said, but relatives frequently complain there isn't sufficient housing available for their loved ones.

"We don't know the number who need housing support. We need to determine the dimension and the size of the need and then to address that need in the budget," he said.

In recent years, New York has created additional housing for people with mental illness, including 5,400 units for mentally ill people at risk of homelessness in New York City. However, there continues to be a need for additional housing all over the state.

In Rockland, there is a range of housing opportunities available for men and women with psychiatric illness. Some live in licensed, supportive housing, such as apartments and community residences. Many live with their families. But the housing is inadequate, said Mary Ann Walsh-Tozer, commissioner of the Department of Mental Health in Rockland.

"The reality is that many of those housing opportunities are not vacant," Walsh-Tozer said. "When there is a good match, people tend to stay. We've been talking for a very long time that there isn't an adequate amount of housing that

is supportive of individuals' recovery that provides a safe, clean and secure environment."

In Westchester, where housing for the mentally ill is also scarce, the department of Community Mental Health keeps an informal record of mentally ill residents who are looking for homes, said its commissioner, Jennifer Schaffer. But the department doesn't share the list with any state organization.

The bill would encourage Westchester and other counties that may have similar lists to forward them to concerned authorities in Albany, she said.

"We welcome this very much," Schaffer said. "There has not been much growth in housing opportunities in the last several years outside of New York City."

Once funded, the wait list would help create housing that would be available for those with mental illness being discharged from jails and prisons, individuals living in adult homes who would like to move to more independent settings, individuals with mental illness living with elderly family members who can no longer take care of them, individuals who are homeless and have a mental illness and individuals discharged from psychiatric facilities and nursing homes.