

The New York Times

Op-Ed Contributor

Making Money Off the Mentally III

By JAY NEUGEBOREN New York Times July 23, 2006

ON July 12, five people returning to an adult home for the mentally ill in Brooklyn were burned to death in a van. My brother, Robert, could have been one of them.

Robert has been a patient in New York's mental-health system for more than 40 years and once lived in an adult home similar to Brooklyn Manor, the for-profit institution where the burn victims and four surviving passengers lived.

It's a grim place to call home. Since the 1980's, the State Department of Health has repeatedly cited Brooklyn Manor for abuses ranging from insect infestation and lack of heat to staff assaults on patients. This month's van accident seems to fit the pattern: The license of the van's driver had been suspended and none of the passengers wore seat belts, the authorities said.

Fortunately for my brother, nearly a decade ago he was discharged from a state mental hospital into the Clinton Residence, a nonprofit home in the Hell's Kitchen section of New York City. Unlike most for-profit adult homes, the Clinton Residence was designed to house people with mental illness. It provides services on site, eliminating the need to crowd residents into a van and transport them elsewhere.

Since moving there, Robert has achieved new levels of autonomy and well-being. Though he had been hospitalized more than 50 times, and never lived outside a hospital for even two consecutive years, he has not been sent to a hospital for mental or emotional problems in the past seven years.

A month ago, Robert moved to a new residence that affords him greater independence (a room of his own!) and less supervision. In his new life, he travels, attends classes, joins family gatherings, has friends and works at Fountain House, a psychiatric rehabilitation center. He has published a book and is the subject of a docudrama. He

has achieved all this because of his extraordinary will, but also because he has received excellent care.

Nonprofit homes like Robert's cost \$25,000 to \$30,000 per resident annually. By contrast, taxpayers spend more than \$40,000 per year for the often shameful "care" residents receive in for-profit homes. Residents at these facilities generate additional costs in part due to increased hospitalizations and emergency room visits. Yet despite this record of negligence and failure, approximately 30,000 New Yorkers remain in for-profit homes. More than a third of them are mentally ill.

The state is well aware that successful nonprofit alternatives exist. What does not exist, however, is the political will in Albany to ensure that these alternative programs are financed and expanded, affording mentally ill New Yorkers decent places to live and competent, caring staff to help them lead happier, more productive lives.

Scandal at for-profit adult homes is nothing new. Over the years, committees and commissions have analyzed the problems. Studies have been published and promises have been made. But little has changed. Instead of closing the most corrupt and dangerous adult homes, the state has subsidized them with grants to help keep them profitably afloat.

After the rhetoric accompanying the van tragedy fades, I fear we will hear only the same old excuses or, worse, another long silence. But in this case, alas, business as usual is sure to equal tragedy as usual.

The state needs a 10-year plan to develop and finance housing not only for New Yorkers living in adult homes, but for the estimated 20,000 mentally ill who are homeless or living in otherwise degrading conditions. Such a plan would save lives and even money in the long run. To do the right thing, the governor, along with every legislator in Albany, need only answer a simple question: What would you do if your brother — sister, parent, child — had been in that van?

Jay Neugeboren is the author of "Imagining Robert: My Brother, Madness and Survival" and "Transforming Madness: New Lives for People Living with Mental Illness."