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A housing survey

Ever since state officials put the wheels of deinstitutionalization in motion for the state's psychiatric hospitals, closing facilities and reintroducing many patients to society, the state has struggled to provide an appropriate level of services in the community for people with mental illnesses. The transition hasn't been smooth.

One of the obvious priorities is making sure that people with mental illness have access to safe, decent, affordable housing. Without that, other crucial services such as job training and counseling are difficult to provide. While the state has made positive strides in providing more community-based housing, it's apparently operating somewhat in the dark in this area. It seems the state has no idea how many people with mental illness are looking for housing at any particular time or what would be the most effective way for the state to provide that housing.

That's the gist of a bill waiting for Gov. Pataki's signature. He should grant it. The bill would authorize the state Office of Mental Health to collect data on people who have applied for and are waiting for housing. Such an assessment hasn't been done by the office in more than a decade. The information would be published monthly, thereby allowing the state, counties and local housing providers to identify needs and plan the best use of resources.

The sponsors of the bill, Republican state Sen. Thomas P. Morahan and Democratic Assemblyman Peter M. Rivera, chairmen of the Mental Health committees in their respective houses, say lack of a housing waiting list has made it difficult to build on successful approaches because it's hard to identify them. This means too many people with mental illness wind up in emergency rooms, homeless shelters and jails. It's virtually impossible, not to mention expensive, to try to integrate people into society this way.

A tracking system of needs and a housing waiting list have helped the state Office of Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities to do long-term planning and direct funds and other resources where they are needed. It only makes sense to use that same successful model to help people with mental illness to find decent housing, which would help them participate in community life and perhaps increase their chances of recovery. It would also provide some peace of mind for their families.