

Group fights to get housing for the mentally ill

BY BOB CONNER
Gazette Reporter

Advocates for the mentally ill on Tuesday urged Gov. George Pataki to sign legislation they said would help people get the services and housing they need.

Steven Coc, chairman of a coalition of community groups, the New York State Campaign for Mental Health Housing, said the state needs to work with local groups to create an updated waiting list of those mentally ill adults in need of housing.

At a news conference with other supporters of the Community

Mental Health Housing Waiting List Bill, Coe said the state Office of Mental Health has opposed the legislation. Critics, Coe said, have raised fears that too many people would get on the list and that it might spur lawsuits.

He and other advocates said the concerns are unwarranted. They cited a 2001 University of Pennsylvania study as demonstrating that supportive housing is "the solution that pays for itself" because of the higher costs of leaving people homeless and untreated.

Creating the list would not itself be costly, said David Seay, executive director of the National Alliance on Mental Illness' state chapter. If, as others claim, there is enough housing, there would be no additional cost, he said.

Scott Reif, a spokesman for Pa-

taki, said the bill was one of more than 300 delivered to the governor from the Legislature on Aug. 4. As is customary, Reif declined to comment on whether the governor would sign or veto it but said action on all of the bills is expected on the last possible day, Aug. 16.

Jill Daniels, spokeswoman for OMH, said its policy is not to comment on pending legislation.

Antonia Lasicki, executive director of the Clifton Park-based statewide advocacy group Association for Community Living, said the population of state psychiatric centers has declined from 93,000 40 years ago to 4,000 today. About 25,000 people are in appropriate "mental health housing," she said, mostly run by nonprofit agencies, where they can get needed support and be helped to recover from their

mental illness.

But, she and other advocates said, many thousands of others are homeless, in jails, prisons or general hospital psychiatric units from which they will be released, staying with aging family members or in "adult homes" run for profit. The latter category, Lasicki said, often means "flopouses."

Advocates at the news conference included two people who have suffered from mental illness, Gary Levin and Shavon Jackson, who said they needed supportive housing in order to be able to learn to live independently.

Jackson, a youth advocate for the Mental Health Association of New York City, said, "Soon I will be maintaining my own home, paying bills and living a life just like anyone else."

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