

The Journal News

Connecting Dots

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Two important bills headed to Gov. George Pataki's desk Friday merit his signature. One is about counting and the other common sense. Ultimately, though, both are about compassion for adults with mental illnesses, including those behind bars and on the street. Connect the dots a bit further, and the measures are as easily about murder victim Concetta Russo-Carriero and Phillip Grant, the homeless ex-convict recently convicted in her slaying.

The first bill proceeds under the assumption that you can't solve a problem until you know how big it is. Lawmakers and advocates for the mentally ill are pushing a measure that would establish within the state mental-health system a list of mentally ill adults awaiting community housing — this to serve a population that now resides in accommodations ranging from shelters and group homes to private homes and the street. Released sex-offender Grant was homeless — and purported by so many to be mentally unstable, the proverbial ticking time bomb — when he encountered office worker Russo-Carriero in a White Plains parking lot last year.

Anecdotal evidence, including from local-agency reports, makes plain that there is a lack of appropriate housing alternatives for people with psychiatric disabilities, whether they be released prisoners, like Grant, or entirely unaffiliated with the criminal justice system, no doubt the larger population. What exactly, though, is the wait time for existing housing? Just who is being unserved? Are less-expensive alternatives being overlooked?

The housing waiting list bill's prime sponsor is state Sen. Thomas Morahan, R-New City. It is modeled on a similar state effort a few years ago on behalf of people with developmental disabilities. As with that initiative, the law would help the officials, for the first time, put real numbers to the predicament, the hope being that real solutions will emerge.

A second bill recognizes that New York is in the 21st century, not the 17th, and that prisoners with psychiatric conditions belong in treatment — not boxed into solitary confinement where their symptoms can only worsen. Hark back to Grant: He spent 23 of his 44 years in prison, for committing three rapes. What in-prison treatment he received has been described as minimal, all but ensuring that the damaged person behind bars would eventually become a damaged person on the street. We don't know what time he spent in solitary.

Mental-health advocates have dubbed their campaign "Boot the SHU." "Special Housing Units" is the euphemism used to describe the practice wherein inmates are dispatched to solitary for 23 hours a day. Studies show that when psychiatrically ill inmates are in solitary confinement, they engage in acts of self-mutilation and commit suicide at a rate three times higher than inmates in the general prison population. Those who survive often experience a cycle of mental deterioration,

followed by periods of costly in-patient care in a psychiatric hospital. All this helps boost recidivism, which means more victims.

The "Boot the SHU" measure would require that mentally ill prisoners get adequate treatment and rehabilitation, and that correctional officers receive better training. Prison guard associations also back the measure; they think it will make for safer prisons. Pataki's office has cited technical problems with the bill, but since it wouldn't become law for 18 months after signing, there would be plenty of time for the Legislature to address them through amendments.

Left-leaning California bans the practice of putting mentally ill prisoners in "special housing units," but so do the tough-on-crime states of Florida and Texas. Surely New York can join them in the 21st century.