



Assessing the Housing Need for People with Mental Illnesses

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Topic: Letter to the Editor

By Senator Thomas P. Morahan and Assemblyman Peter M. Rivera, Chairs of respectively New York State Senate and Assembly Mental Health Committees

~~~ The Time is Now for a Housing Waiting List Law in New York

It's been more than ten years since New York State has conducted a needs assessment on housing and services available to those with mental illnesses.

In that time, we've taken positive steps to address what we can only estimate is a growing need for a safe, affordable housing with adequate support services, like job training and counseling, for people with mental illnesses. For example, under the governor's watch, the New York – New York agreements are making it possible for the state, New York City, and non-profit agencies to work together to create additional housing units for homeless people with mental illness. These and other initiatives are helping to reduce the number of people with mental illnesses that are in and out of homeless shelters, hospitals, emergency rooms, and jails.

Despite these successes, New York has no method of tracking its progress so that we can use proven models to make the wisest investment of state funds. A statewide Mental Health Housing Waiting List law would bridge this gap.

Governor Pataki has such a bill on his desk. Bill A.2895-A/ S. 3653-A, which we co-sponsored, would allow us to build on recent successes, furnish the state, counties, and local housing providers with a roadmap for smart planning, and do the right thing for those with mental illnesses and their families. The governor should move quickly to sign this bill into law.

The bill calls for the New York State Office of Mental Health to collect data from around the state on the number of people who have applied and waiting for housing. They would then publish the data monthly so that we can identify and track what works, what's needed, and where to target state funds.

This common-sense legislation is long overdue.

The bill has the support of New York City Mayor Bloomberg, the New York State Conference of Local Mental Hygiene Directors, and a coalition of over sixty mental health providers, consumers, family members, housing developers, social policy experts,

and legal rights organizations.

There is no doubt that safe, affordable supportive housing increase chances of recovery for people with mental health illness. President Bush's New Freedom Commission on Mental Health states that the lack of decent, safe, affordable and integrated housing is one of the most significant barriers to full participation in community life for those with mental illnesses.

With proper planning and an adequate supply of community housing with supports, we reduce the number of homeless people with mental illnesses on our streets and provide them with an opportunity to live productive lives. We assure a home for children with mental health illnesses who are aging out of foster care. We provide peace-of-mind to families who worry loved ones suffering from mental illnesses will have no place in the world when they're gone. And we keep those with mental illnesses from being shuffled between shelters, hospitals, and jails.

We also save money and assure a smart investment of state funds. For example, studies have shown that the cost of leaving people homeless and relying on emergency interventions is far more expensive that redirecting funds toward community-based housing and services that increase chances for recovery.

The fact is, by putting in place long-term planning tool for decent, appropriate housing for people with mental illnesses, we do a great service to those who suffer from mental illnesses, to their families, and to our communities as a whole. Without a means of tracking what works statewide, we are forced to target state dollars in a way that is neither the most responsible, not the most effective.

Other agencies, like the Office of Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities conduct annual needs assessment and maintain waiting lists. In fact, their data resulted in the nationally renowned New York Cares Housing Program for the developmentally disabled. With this legislation, New York State has the opportunity to create a similar successful program for people with mental illnesses.

New York has come a long way in the effort to provide needed housing for people with mental illnesses. Let's build on these efforts with the tools we need to wisely now and into the future. It's time for the governor to take the next step and sign out Mental Health Waiting List legislation into law.

Senator Thomas P. Morahan; and
Assemblyman Peter M. Rivera

The writers are chairs of respectively New York State Senate and Assembly Mental Health Committees