

METROLAND MAGAZINE

Don't Leave Us Out In The Cold Housing Advocates For The Mentally Ill Protest In Albany To Highlight The Need For Reform

by David Canfield Metroland Magazine January 25, 2007

'Housing for special needs is an extremely important area, and the Pataki administration did not invest in it,' said state Sen. Velmanette Montgomery (D-Brooklyn), a member of the Senate Committee on Mental Health and Developmental Disabilities. Gov. Eliot Spitzer already has expressed an interest in this issue, Montgomery said, an issue that former Gov. George Pataki ignored for too long.

On Tuesday, supporters of housing for the mentally ill gathered in Albany to call on Spitzer and the state Legislature to include \$100 million in the upcoming state budget to maintain existing housing for those with mental disabilities and to fund new construction. Montgomery was one of many public figures who spoke at the rally.

The event, organized by the New York State Campaign for Mental Health Housing, began in the well of the Legislative Office Building in Albany. The area was crowded wall-to-wall with supporters, most wearing lime-green shirts proclaiming "The road to recovery starts with a good home."

The event drew people from around the state as well as many from the Capital Region. Genevieve Plair, 36, grew up in foster care due to her mother's schizophrenia. When she was too old for foster care and still had nowhere to go, she lived in a group home.

Plair, who gave up her three children due to her own mental illness, now lives in a homeless shelter in Albany. Her current situation, as well as her history with the financial and emotional problems caused by mental illness, is what led her to Tuesday's rally. Plair herself is in need of housing; she said she must be out of the homeless shelter by April 1.

"It's very difficult trying to find an apartment," she said. "I just don't want to live in a rat trap." Plair wants a decent place to live where her children can come to visit and be comfortable. "I don't want some place where there are roaches or mice crawling around."

Likewise, Schenectady resident Roy Neville, who spoke at the event, has experience with the need for housing for the mentally ill. Neville has two children with schizophrenia, one in Albany and one in Schenectady, who live in housing provided by nonprofit groups. Neville stresses the importance of housing as the backbone to a stable life. "It's made all the difference in the world for my two kids, and all the others who have a stable place to live," he said. "They can do OK."

He said that different illnesses and different situations require a wide variety of options. More options would give the mentally disabled "a chance to be as normal as the rest of us and get along with other people, get some insight, be voters, be workers and good neighbors," he said. "We don't want people in institutions."

Neville is grateful that his children are lucky enough to have apartments provided by nonprofit mental-health groups, but recognizes that many are less fortunate. "It's a good system," he said. "It's just not enough for everybody."

Currently there are more than 10,000 homeless New Yorkers suffering from mental illness. Thousands of others are living in shelters, hospitals, or adult homes. The Campaign for Mental Health Housing said that 35,000 new units are needed.

"In the previous administration, the Office of Mental Health commissioner was brought in with a clear mandate that OMH was not in the housing business, and housing was not an issue that they should concern themselves with," said campaign chairman Steve Coe. "So there was no attention paid to the issue. In the last three of four years, nothing has moved forward."

This inaction motivated the group to stage Tuesday's event, the largest gathering for the issue that Coe has seen in 30 years. He says that almost 1,600 people registered to attend the event, which featured numerous speakers from the Legislature and culminated with a rally in front of the Capitol.

A megaphone was passed around on the steps of the Capitol, and when one attendee asked how many members of the crowd had ended up in an adult home due to their mental illness, the crowd responded with a sizeable amount of raised hands. The same was true when the crowd was asked about being forced to live in homeless shelters and hospitals.

Before marching around the building, supporters arranged themselves in the shape of a house, hoping to make the image visible from the windows of the Capitol building. Someone shouted to Gov. Spitzer, in absentia, to please "not be another Gov. Pataki." That seemed to be the sentiment among supporters: hope for change in the future, but still a fear of being let down by the state once again.