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Saying 'yes' to a normal life

Mental health advocates say housing, jobs needed to help their recovery

By ANDREW CARDEN
 Gazette staff writer

Hundreds of New Yorkers with psychiatric disabilities rallied in Albany last week to urge Gov. Andrew Cuomo and state legislators to reinvest savings from planned psychiatric facility downsizing into housing, employment and peer support.

The New York Association of Psychiatric Rehabilitation Services, a statewide partnership of tens of thousands of New Yorkers who use or provide community mental health services, began its 14th Annual Legislative Day with a two-hour event in the Kitty Carlisle Hart Theatre at The Egg.

Harvey Rosenthal, executive director of Psychiatric Rehabilitation Services, introduced a panel of mental health experts and activists, who discussed the governor's 2012-2013 Executive Budget. Among the major initiatives continued under it are health homes and managed care expansion, aimed at overhauling health and behavior health care systems to improve outcomes by decreasing the use of hospitals and emergency rooms.

"If we're going to lower the money in hospitals, it must be reinvested in housing, peer support and employment for the residents," said Rosenthal. "We're on board with the governor's support for health homes, so long as the residents have more control over their care. These people need a house and a job."

Rosenthal offered praise to the governor and the New York State Department of Health, though reiterated there is more work to be done.

"The governor is holding the system to be more accountable, trying to give people more control over their health care and working to close institutions," said Rosenthal. "There are a lot of good people in the Health Department, but they have much more oversight to do."

Rosenthal celebrated Psychiatric Rehabilitation Services, now in its 30th year of operation, for working to fight against the solitary confinement that "tortures" mentally ill prisoners and for leading in the effort to pass Timothy's Law, which ensures equal health coverage for mental health ailments as physical ailments, in 2006.

There are, Rosenthal said, about 80,000 people in New York state with psychiatric disabilities. Many suffering from mental illness, Rosenthal said, are often told by their health providers they will never work, get married or own a home.



ABOVE
 Gazette photo by Anthony Mancini
 In an effort to promote housing, unemployment and peer support for individuals with psychiatric disabilities, hundreds of mental health advocates marched in a "Reinvest for Recovery" rally, led by NYAPRS executive director Harvey Rosenthal, outside the Capitol last week.

LEFT
 Gazette photo by Alli Sofer
 Speaking before hundreds of mental health advocates at NYAPRS' 14th Annual Legislative Day in the Kitty Carlisle Hart Theatre at the Egg, Coco Cox, a former psychiatric institution resident, discussed the freedom she feels living in her own apartment.

“We’re here to say ‘yes’ to a normal life for the 80,000. You’re here to tell your legislators you want a job, want to get married, want to own a home and want to have rights.”

— Harvey Rosenthal, executive director of Psychiatric Rehabilitation Services

"We're here to say 'yes' to a normal life for the 80,000," said Rosenthal. "You're here to tell your legislators you want a job, want to get married, want to own a home and want to have rights."

Rosenthal polled the audience on how many are currently employed. While a mere handful raised their hands, the vast majority raised their hands upon asked whether they want to work.

According to Douglas Hovey, the association's president, there are 27

psychiatric institutions still in operation in New York state. He has called for all to be closed down, preferably four per year, with a target of all 27 being shuttered within five years.

"Right now, New York's sucking at getting people out of psychiatric institutions," said Hovey. "If we continue to allow the state to do segregated programs, poverty among the disabled

will continue and unemployment will grow."

Among persons with psychiatric disabilities, said Hovey, there is a 75 percent unemployment rate, with widespread poverty.

Clarence Sundram, founding chairman of the New York State Commission on Quality of Care for the Mentally Disabled, garnered NYAPRS's Lifetime

Achievement Award at the event.

"In the late 1970s and early 1980s, the mental health conversation mostly focused on medication regulations, research and staffing issues," said Sundram. "Since NYAPRS found a voice, the conversation has changed to a focus on self-reliance and peer support. This is a phenomenal achievement."

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During his acceptance speech, Sundram, who Rosenthal called a "hero," polled the audience on whether they had experienced abuse or mistreatment in a state psychiatric facility. A clear majority of the crowd raised their hands, but, upon polling whether the audience had reported their incidents, only a handful kept their hands raised.

"People are afraid of reporting and facing the possible retaliation," said Sundram. "We need a trained, professional response to find the wrongdoers and fix the problem."

Steve Coe, executive director of Community Access, which assists people with psychiatric disabilities in making the transition from institutions to independent living, suggested all new housing should set aside units for persons with disabilities.

"If every empty, dilapidated building was renovated there would be enough space for every disabled person in New York," said Coe. "Once you have a place to live, anything is possible."

Steve Miccio, executive director of Projects to Empower and Organize the Psychiatrically Labeled, Inc., a consumer advocacy agency, called for improved protocols for the transition of individuals from institutions into the community.

"If you're going to move, you want to visit your new place, see the community and get used to your new surroundings," said Miccio. "We need to help people bridge back into life."

Coco Cox, a former psychiatric institution resident who has lived in her own apartment for the past two years, called on the governor to invest in moving residents out of institutions.

"We need to remind our legislators there are so many still in homes who need to be let out and released into the community," said Cox. "I can remember being released and making my first meal in my new apartment. That first bite of nice, hot, buttery toast was just so good."

Issac Brown, CEO of Baltic Street, AEH, Inc., which works to support recovery efforts among the mentally ill,



Hundreds of mental health advocates, sporting an array of homemade signs, rallied in outside the Capitol last week, calling for housing, employment and peer support for persons with psychiatric disabilities.

seconded the need to renovate empty buildings for individuals transitioning out of institutions. Brown, who now owns a home in New Jersey, was himself once in support housing.

"Twenty years ago, I was someone wandering the streets who couldn't put two and two together," said Brown. "I know how difficult it is to be homeless and without the necessary medication."

Sen. Roy McDonald, R-Saratoga, lavished praise on Rosenthal for his efforts.

"Harvey Rosenthal pleads with his heart, has compassion and he cares and that's what we need right now, even in the face of our current economic problems," said McDonald, who chairs the Senate Committee on Mental Health.

Following the event, NYAPRS drew a

crowd of hundreds to a "Reinvest for Recovery" rally outside the Capitol. Chanting "housing, employment and peer support," participants marched around the building, sporting homemade signs such as "We Need Affordable Housing Now," "Reinvest in My Recovery," "More Jobs, Not ER Visits" "We Want Peer Support, Not Pills" and "Give Me Housing, Not a Hospital Bed."