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 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 advocates, who discussed the governor’s 2012-2013 Executive Budget. Among the major initiatives contained 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 36th 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.

“ ‘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
Life

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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 trained professional response to find the wrongdoers and fix the problem.”

Steve Cooe, 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 Cooe. “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.”

Irene Brown, CEO of Baltic Street, AHE, Inc., which works to support recovery efforts among the mentally ill, 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.”

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

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

“Harvey Rosenthal picks 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.”