



Suffolk County Voter

www.lwv-suffolkcounty.org

September 2007

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Tues. Sept. 11
Thurs. Oct. 4
Wed. Oct. 17

LWVSC Board Meeting—Riverhead Library 10am-12 noon
LWVNYS Ida Trager Workshop, SUNY Farmingdale 11am-3pm
LWVSC Board Meeting—Riverhead Library 10am-12 noon

ALTERNATIVES TO INCARCERATION New Directions for Services for Mentally Ill People in Suffolk County

Because of the League's long-term support for Alternatives to Incarceration and awareness that people with mental illness often become entangled with the criminal justice system because of their illnesses, some League members attended briefings at Pilgrim Psychiatric Center on July 31. Dr. Michael Hogan, the new Commissioner of the NYS Office of Mental Health, provided his perspectives on the State's public mental health system since he arrived several months ago and emphasized approaches to optimize services.

—Most people with serious mental illness are in poverty and the total bundle of benefits does not raise their income level over \$10,000.

—There are high rates of unemployment among them because many fear losing their SSI if they work.

—Many people lack care, and entry into care is often late.

—On average there are two years between the first sign of psychosis and the first step toward care.

—There are approximately 11 years between the first signs of psychosis and a person's ability to function well.

Usually, first signs of illness appear in childhood or adolescence; they worsen through the years. Early treatment is critical; it is important that support from mental health clinics and clinicians is provided where the children are (schools, homes, etc.) The stigma attached to mental illness also impacts on people seeking treatment (although apparently lessening). Attitudes change in the context of relationships; this occurs when people know others who struggle with mental illness.

Access to care is often difficult to come by, one reason being the lack of beds in facilities that provide service for mentally ill people. Ideally, no one should have to wait 24 hours for acute care. According to Dr. Hogan, most care is suboptimal, and there is incomplete insurance coverage. Because of the closings of three very large psychiatric hospitals in Suffolk County, we have a disproportionately large number of people needing services. In addition, some hospitals which had beds for people in psychiatric crisis are either eliminating or seriously cutting back on the number of beds available, intensifying the crisis Suffolk faces in providing adequate care.

Available, appropriate housing for people with mental illness is severely limited. OMH invests large amounts of resources into expanding housing capacity, but realistically, the State is not going to build a home for everyone with mental illness. The importance of advocating for affordable housing, making housing a high priority concern of treatment providers, and supporting consumers and families in their efforts to sustain their housing was stressed.

In regard to forensic mental health services, it is important to ensure that corrections officers and police are well prepared to assess and respond therapeutically and appropriately to the mental health needs of inmates and those transitioning back to communities. Corrections-based mental health services are to be expanded. Mental Health

Courts continue to be developed as alternatives to incarceration.

Dr. Hogan advocates for changes in how services are provided, that they be more person-driven. PROS (Personalized Recovery Oriented Services) is a comprehensive program for individuals with severe and persistent mental illness. The goal of PROS is to integrate treatment, support, and rehabilitation in a manner which facilitates the individual's recovery. The goals for individuals in the program are to improve functioning, reduce inpatient utilization, reduce emergency services, reduce contact with the criminal justice system, increase employment, attain higher levels of education, and secure preferred housing. This is a more integrated and continuous approach than much of what exists and it is an investment in helping people to get a life!

Suffolk is one of three counties that is an "early adopter" of PROS; several PROS licenses have already been issued to several of our providers by OMH. It is essentially Medicaid-funded. There are many difficulties within the program which yet need to be worked out, but that work is on-going.

A most positive change within our country in recent years is the understanding that any person can recover, even those whose conditions seem helpless and hopeless. There is a deep commitment within Suffolk County to reach all those in need of help. (See www.networkofcare.org.)

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