



Suffolk County Voter

www.lwv-suffolkcounty.org

February 2008

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Wed. Feb. 20
Wed. Mar. 19

LWVSC Board Meeting—Riverhead Library 10:00am-Noon
LWVSC Board Meeting—Riverhead Library 10:00am-Noon

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Editorial

CPEP: An Unmet Responsibility

Suffolk County has generally suffered from a shortage of services for the mentally ill, but the problem has grown more acute in recent years. Limited housing options, insufficient inpatient psychiatry beds, and long waits for many outpatient services have left many individuals seeking psychiatric help with few options.

The CPEP (Comprehensive Psychiatric Emergency Program) facility at Stony Brook Medical Center was established in 1990 to provide emergency evaluation and triage services for the public mental health system. These growing systemic deficiencies have made this crucial program the default service for virtually every unmet mental health need. The CPEP provides a safety net for both the immediate care needs of the general public as well as for the chronically mentally ill, many of whom may be homeless, uninsured, and lacking in social support. Of the nearly 6000 visits per year to the CPEP, more than half arrive in the custody of police. The police are often called to provide secure transportation for people suffering from schizophrenia, bi-polar disorder, clinical depression, and substance abuse as well as personal and family crises.

About 25% of the patients brought to CPEP require admission to an inpatient psychiatric unit at Stony Brook or other community hospitals but the lack of ready access to such beds may lead to delays in placement and congestion in the CPEP. In general, the goal of the program is to provide short-term assessment, stabilization, and triage services which often lead to cost effective outcomes by avoiding unnecessary hospitalization. Many Suffolk County agencies rely heavily on the availability of the CPEP program. Many referrals are made by the Sheriff's department and the Riverhead Jail, by Adult and Child Protective Services, the Family and Criminal Courts, along with the network of County sponsored outpatient clinics and housing providers. Moreover, a significant homeless population depends on CPEP to access housing services provided by the Department of Social Services.

CPEP: An Unmet Responsibility, continued...

Overcrowding and over-utilization of the available facilities, the lack of sufficient inpatient beds, and long waits for housing placements for people with mental illness through Single Point of Access (SPA) drive up the length of stays in CPEP, leading to congestion and delays in placement. As a result, the limited space and capacity of the program is frequently saturated, leading the facility to go on “diversion” as much as 25% of the time. When this occurs, the police are notified and all transports are directed to the nearest community hospitals which are far less well equipped to provide the range of services available at CPEP.

The Stony Brook University Medical Center is currently working on a plan to build a new CPEP annex which would greatly improve the capacity and functionality of the program. The goal is to substantially increase the physical size of the unit, double the evaluation and intervention space, and provide a more therapeutic environment conducive to the comfort and care of the patients. It will also increase significantly the number of available beds.

The cost of this expansion presents a significant challenge to the facility. The NYS Office of Mental Hygiene has committed some capital funding to support the plan, indicating its recognition of the justification of both its need and the specific plan. At the same time, the Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Science at Stony Brook has sought additional resources from private philanthropic sources as well as from Suffolk County. Dr. Mark Sedler, Chair of Psychiatry at the Stony Brook Medical Center, has described the CPEP as the “cornerstone of the Suffolk County public mental health system.” He adds that “we have been overwhelmed with so many diverse demands and unmet needs that it is apparent that an expansion at this time is the right thing for both the hospital and for the county.”

It is the county’s responsibility to provide adequate care for its residents. Such vulnerable people cannot be dismissed to live on the streets. They often barely survive, and may present public safety concerns in many communities. Moreover, an expanded CPEP program is likely to be the most cost effective solution to the current crisis in services for the mentally ill compared to the expenses associated with repeated emergency room services, unnecessary in-patient stays in hospitals, as well as incarceration for behaviors resulting from untreated mental illness.

County Executive Steve Levy and the Suffolk County Legislature should recognize the critical role that CPEP plays in the public mental health system, accept the responsibilities which our government has for supporting public health programs, and produce the funding which is so urgently needed. The League strongly recommends that they do so.

Katherine Hoak