



Suffolk County Voter

www.lwv-suffolkcounty.org

June 2008

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Wed. June 18

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

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Sheriff Vincent F. DeMarco is Speaker at LWVSC 40th Annual Convention

Forty LWVSC members and guests attended the 40th Annual Convention on May 15 at the Bellport Country Club. The guest speaker was SC Sheriff Vincent F. DeMarco, who presented a short dvd on programs at the Suffolk County Jail which have been developed to reduce recidivism. These programs include training in bakery work, computers, and sewing. There are also job interviewing programs. The limitations of these programs include lack of



Lisa Scott thanks Sheriff DeMarco

space, and the need for selecting candidates in the jail population appropriate for these programs. From questions raised after the dvd, we learned that the average duration of stay in the jail is only 7 days, since many of those incarcerated are awaiting trial, and no one is permitted to be there longer than a year. The majority of those in the jail are there for misdemeanors.

Guests at the convention also included NYS Assemblywoman Pat Edgington, and SC Legislators Jack Edgington and Brian Beedenbender.

Reform Albany Day

On Reform Albany Day, April 29th, nine members of the LWV of Suffolk County, along with members of Common Cause and other good government groups, went to Albany to lobby for reform in ethics, rules, redistricting, and campaign finance. Initially, each of us chose the issue we wanted to focus on, but once we arrived, we learned our teams were already assigned.

Before lobbying, we participated in a forum on the issues. Comptroller Thomas DiNapoli and Attorney General Andrew Cuomo were two of several guest speakers who addressed several aspects of the need to reform Albany.

At lunch we met with our respective teams and prepared for our afternoon lobbying meetings. Although some of the teams were able only to meet with aides, several did meet with their state legislators.

We felt the day was worthwhile. Reform is definitely needed in Albany!

Judie Gorenstein



CPEP, Revisited

Some members of the Legislative Committee visited with Dr. Mark Sedler, Chief Psychiatrist of the Stony Brook Medical Center, to follow up on our Editorial on CPEP a few months ago. We saw the current floor plans, and those for the expansion. We learned of many of the difficulties continually confronted by the administration and staff in its attempts to deal adequately with the seriously mentally ill people who arrive there. One ongoing problem is the shortage of inpatient psychiatry beds in community hospitals. This frequently leads to delays in the placement of patients deemed to be in need of psychiatric admission. In addition, there are limited options for outpatient treatment and supportive housing that many who enter CPEP need in order to function and survive. As a result, it is not always possible to move people through the facility in a timely manner. This causes congestion and backlogs in CPEP, forcing it to temporarily divert the police transport of patients to local hospitals. These hospitals usually lack the round-the-clock staffing and specialized clinical resources of CPEP.

When clients are brought to CPEP, they must first enter the Medical Center's Emergency Room and go through its triage system, a requirement of all who enter there. Since there are physical disorders which present themselves with seeming emotional symptoms, it is of significant importance that this procedure be followed. Anyone who has entered any emergency room is aware of length of time this usually involves. Once a client has been cleared in this manner, though, it is possible to enter the CPEP Emergency Room. In an effort to improve and expedite access to the program, Dr. Sedler explained that the CPEP would soon take over the triage process for all police transports. It is anticipated that this will significantly reduce the turnaround time for police officers at University Hospital.



*Seated: Joyce Rosenthal, Sondra Irvine
Standing: Dr. Sedler, Katherine Hoak, Adam Gaus*

Although we were unable to enter most of CPEP because of privacy and confidentiality concerns, we were able to see (because there were no clients present) the waiting room, and that for the police who may accompany them. We were startled to see how stark, small, and cramped those areas are. We got a glimpse, too, of the nurses' station and saw it also as excessively cramped. For the demands on CPEP, the facility is tiny.

Some of us have or have had family members or friends plagued by severe mental illness. The thought of any of them having to enter CPEP is most distressing. We know that there are frequent words of support for people with mental illness, but actual provisions made for them are more truthful and speak louder. We therefore laud County Executive Steve Levy for his including the CPEP expansion in the county's capital budget. It is critically needed, and it is apparent that he recognizes this.

We can appreciate the discomfort police officers must feel in their having to accompany people in great distress that at times evolves into violent behavior. We laud the SC Police Department for instituting a program for their officers to train them to recognize mental illness and to deescalate behaviors before they evolve into outbursts. Such training should result in smaller numbers of people having to be brought to CPEP in the first place.

The League strongly supports the planned new expansion for CPEP at Stony Brook Medical Center. The Medical Center's Administration, led by Dr. Steven Strongwater, understands the critical necessity for CPEP's expansion. It is also supported by the NYS Office of Mental Health.

The League of Women Voters continues to advocate for improved services for those suffering from mental illness in our county. Suffolk has a surprisingly high number of people in this situation compared to that of other counties, and comparably very low availability of services. Supportive housing is available for only about 20% of those in need of it. There must be an increase in the number of inpatient psychiatry beds in community hospitals.

We have found that early access to services is by far the most cost effective means of handling the needs of our mentally ill neighbors and family. The best-case scenario for Suffolk would be a determination on the part of County Executive Levy and the Legislature to increase outpatient services so that they are available for those at the onset of mental illness. Such an availability would result in significantly less need at the deeper end.

Katherine Hoak