



Suffolk County Voter

July 2008

www.lwv-suffolkcounty.org

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Wed. July 16

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

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Suffolk County Health Services Update

We learned last month that the County Executive was looking closely at the Suffolk Health Plan to see whether it is cost-effective. The Suffolk Health Plan is the HMO founded by Suffolk County to insure patients at the health centers. The budget that the Legislature passed in November already figured as revenue the sales price of the Suffolk Health Plan (6.5 million dollars) and the fund balance that the Suffolk Health Plan had accrued through the years (11.4 million dollars), which had been kept as a reserve to meet New York State requirements. This meant that not selling the Health Plan would cause budgetary distress. Backed by the Department of Health Services and the Suffolk Health Plan Board, a search settled on Neighborhood Health Providers, LLC, a for-profit company that is owned by two nonprofit hospitals.

They also own Royal Health Plan, which has been doing the billing for the Health Centers for

many years. Because it is much larger than the Suffolk Health Plan, the hope is that Neighborhood Health Providers will have lower overhead costs per patient, and will be able to command better rates from Medicaid. It will not have to follow the many regulations of the state and county that a governmental entity has to meet. It has agreed to continue to serve the health center patients for up to five years (a limit set by the state), but we feared that there might be pressures to curtail the services to the health center patients. We also questioned the criticism that enrollment in the Suffolk Health Plan was decreasing, and that it was losing money. We attended the special meeting held by the Health and Human Services Committee to explore the issue, and read the following statement. On June 10, the Legislature did vote to go ahead with the sale, with four legislators voting against it.

(see statement on page 2)

Suffolk County BOE Updates Ways & Means... ...How Much Will It Really Cost?

Commissioner Anita Katz and Deputy Commissioner Wayne Rogers addressed the Ways and Means Committee on May 28, 2008 to update the committee in HAVA compliance and its anticipated fiscal impact on Suffolk County. We will be getting \$14,840,000 of HAVA money and \$13,500,000 will be spent on the replacement voting machines with the remainder of the money going for training and education of the poll workers and the public. This year the county has spent \$4,700,000 on the new machines. Suffolk county has ordered 370 Sequoia Dominion Optical Scan voting systems in order that there will be an accessible voting machine for people with disabilities in each polling site for the September 9, 2008 primary and the November 4, 2008 presidential election. Forty of these voting machines have already been delivered and the remainder will be delivered in July. As it is anticipated that it will take 15 minutes or more for the persons with disabilities to vote using the new machines, the general public will be urged to continue to vote on the lever machines this year.

However, in 2009 all the lever voting machines will be replaced by the Sequoia Dominion Optical Scan voting system. It is anticipated that all the new machines will be delivered by January 2009 which necessitates that a new warehouse be built for the additional storage. There are three reasons for needing additional storage space: the boxes which store the optical scanners are larger than the lever machines, the lever machines need to be kept for at least a year just in case of problems, and the paper ballots need to be stored for two years. The HAVA money should cover the cost of buying the additional machines, providing storage, training poll workers and educating the public. Education is seen as crucial. The BOE has budgeted \$275,000. Information will be disseminated on the county website and through direct mailings. Videos as well as demonstrations of the new machines where voters will be able to try them will be held at town halls, senior centers and at other public forums. (The possibility of videos being shown before/after Meet the Candidates Nights was discussed afterwards with Comm. Katz who thought it was a good idea.) Steps will be taken to make the

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**Statement made at Health and Human Services Committee
special meeting on the Suffolk Health Plan**

The League of Women Voters of the United States announced its final health care position years ago, outlining goals the League believes are fundamental for U.S. health care policy. These include policies that promote access to a basic level of quality care at an affordable cost for all U.S. residents. The position stressed the importance of standardizing the level of services provided under publicly funded health care programs. The League of Women Voters of the Hamptons joins with the League of Women Voters of Suffolk County in supporting these policies. We believe that IR 1480 has the potential to jeopardize the smooth running of the county health center system that has taken many years to develop.

More than 30 years ago, Suffolk County recognized the need for broad access to health care by establishing eight family health centers and three satellite offices built and maintained with the help of taxpayer funds. In the early 1990's when new Medicaid regulations required that all patients on Medicaid join an HMO that would manage their health care, many health center patients found themselves unable to continue their care at the health centers because their new insurance providers could not pay the health centers. The County created Suffolk Health Plan in 1995 to cover care for Medicaid patients at the health centers and their specialists. Since then, SHP has become a provider also for patients on Child Health Plus and Family Health Plus, for care delivered at the health centers.

Suffolk's public health care system has been a model for other counties for providing comprehensive care at reasonable cost for the under- and un-insured. The Suffolk Health Plan has been part of that system. At meetings I have attended at the South Brookhaven Health Center Advisory Committee, a representative of the Suffolk Health Plan has been present to discuss the program and to be part of the planning of patient care at the health center. Its manual of operations stresses the comprehensive and preventive care that is offered through the health centers. The primary care services that are offered through the health centers are supplemented by a provider network of approximately 1,100 specialists.

Because of declining enrollment in the Suffolk Health Plan, and increasing costs, the County Executive has recommended the sale of the Suffolk Health Plan to a private company. According to the report of the Budget Review Office of the County Legislature, the Suffolk Health Plan has continued to turn a profit and may be able to increase enrollment with the addition of the Family Health Plan. Marketing staff of the Suffolk Health Plan was cut from 14 to eight between 2004 and 2008. Few of the marketers are Spanish speaking. If administrative problems do exist, can they not be corrected by the county if the county owns the plan?

Theoretically, if the County HMO is sold to a private company, it may choose after the three to five year initial term to include fewer patients from the health centers and more from the broader market if their care costs less. If so, and patients lose the coverage at the health centers, they will again lose the preventive care that we know is so important and turn to local hospital emergency rooms.

Given the difficulties we see on a national level regarding the absence of health coverage for so many millions of people and the inability of elected officials on a national level to grapple with solutions to this problem, we encourage a slow, deliberate analysis of the Suffolk Health Plan before any sale or other action would take place. It seems to us that the County cannot walk away from its critical responsibility for publicly funded health care for the most vulnerable in our communities without further consideration of the effects on that population.

*Presented by Nancy Marr, LWV of Suffolk County
Judy Samuelson, LWV of the Hamptons on June 2, 2008*

Suffolk County BOE Update... *continued*

transition go smoothly and gain the public's confidence.

There was concern on the part of many members of the Ways and Means committee about the operating expenses. There is an annual expense for software of \$150,000. The cost of printing the ballots for the primary and general elections is estimated to be between \$1,500,000 and \$2,000,000 as it is mandated that ballots be printed for 115% of registered voters in English in addition to a percentage being printed in Spanish. What happens if there are special elections or if there is a court case which may not be decided until the day before Election Day? These present additional costs. One legislator also brought up the possibility of there needing to be a sprinkler system in stor-

age area due to the amount of paper. The need to recycle the ballots was also discussed. Ways to curtail some costs were also addressed. In the future, can printing and software be done in house? Can the county find free storage space for the lever machines? These questions remain unanswered for now, but what is certain is that our lever machines will be replaced by 2009. New York is under a mandate and makes monthly reports to the judge on its progress. In 2009, all New Yorkers will vote on a paper ballot optical scan voting system and in Suffolk County we will be using the Sequoia Dominion System.

*Judie Gorenstein
LWVSC Voter Service Chair*