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THE PROMISE OF COMMUNITY MENTAL HEALTH IS BROKEN AGAIN

by

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Lost in the macro-economics and macro-politics of the making of New York State's budget is the fate of some of its most vulnerable citizens--people with mental illnesses.

They are hurt by the proposed budget. They are robbed of a better future which they have been promised for many years.

New York State first promised to provide a decent life for people with mental illnesses in the community in 1954. Instead they were discharged from institutions and abandoned without community care.

Many live in squalor. Many are homeless. Many others have become the responsibility of their families, who are often overburdened and who, in any event, are now aging and will not be able to provide care much longer.

In 1978 New York State began to invest in community care for people with mental illnesses on a limited basis. There was a decade of incremental progress.

In 1988 a new State Commissioner of Mental Health was appointed, and he quickly developed a vision, and a plan, to keep the promise of community mental health in New York State. At first his vision was funded, and the slow progress of the previous decade opened into hope for thoroughgoing structural reform. The promise of community mental health would be fulfilled.

Now his vision has been undermined by shortsighted, desperate budget cuts to both institutional care and community services, cuts which will immediately reinforce the worst consequences of deinstitutionalization and which also jeopardize possible future improvements.

The proposed Executive Budget cuts approximately \$100 million from state institutions for adults, but, instead of transferring some of these savings to alternative community services, cuts these services roughly \$40 million. In addition the proposed budget turns its back on the needs of children with serious emotional disturbances, also cutting both inpatient care and outpatient capacity.

Hard as it is to believe, the budget could have been worse. By all accounts the Governor took a personal interest in mental health this year, and in the final weeks permitted financial restructuring that saved tens of millions of dollars proposed to be cut at no cost to the state. Most importantly the Governor rejected a proposal to freeze housing and community service development which had been

previously authorized and funded.

The Governor, of course, will claim that rejecting the freeze is the same as providing new community services. It is not; it is merely permitting the promises made in the budgets of the past several years to be kept. The "new" beds in the community are, for the most part, the same beds that were new last year and the year before and have been repeatedly deferred.

Some, I suppose, will criticize the Governor for merely moving an old pea under a new shell. We are very relieved that he is supporting some development this year. Our greater concern is that nothing has been included in the budget proposal to permit community program development after 1992-93. How can the state simultaneously propose massive reduction of institutions over the next few years and make no provision for future development of alternative community services?

Ordinarily we would look confidently to the State Legislature to rectify the Executive Budget Request. But last year the Legislature actually cut the appropriation for mental health recommended by the Governor, and this year the Senate is considering a freeze on most development. In general, the impact of the State budget on adults and children with mental illnesses and their families seems to be a matter of political indifference.

The only issue that has drawn attention is the long term plan to close some state institutions at last. And this is in reality an issue of local economics and, therefore, politics rather than an issue of the adequacy of care.

Closing unneeded state facilities could save both operating and long term capital costs without loss of needed care. In fact the savings could be used to finance needed expansion of community care. The tragedy of the current budget is that none of the savings will be invested. Community care instead will be cut. The promise of community mental health and the hope to set the mental health system on a sound long term financial base are sacrificed to the exigencies of the moment.

It is not possible this year to be politically realistic and to advocate for an adequate response to the real needs of people with mental illnesses in New York State. Instead we are calling on the Legislature, and the Governor, to support several minimal priorities:

**No freeze of housing and community service development

**\$3 million for program development grants for housing and community service development after 1992-93

**Restoration of cuts to Local Assistance and Community Support System funding through additional financial restructuring at no cost to the State

**\$5 million to restore community mental health services for seriously mentally ill adults

**\$5 million to restore community mental health services for seriously emotionally disturbed children and adolescents.

Surely a reduction of proposed cuts by \$13 million to preserve some vital community mental health services and to lay the groundwork for expansion when times are better is not too much to ask in a state budget of \$55 billion.

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