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EDITORIAL DESK

Wanted: 24-Hour Care for the Mentally Ill

By Jay Neugeboren

In October, for the first time in more than six years, my brother, Robert, was living outside a state mental hospital, and the two of us were having dinner together in a Chinese restaurant on Ninth Avenue in Manhattan. The restaurant was around the corner from Robert's new home on West 48th Street -- Project Renewal, a residence for 57 men and women who, like Robert, suffer from long-term serious and persistent mental illness.

Robert, 56, had his first breakdown at the age of 19 while a Regents scholarship student at City College, and since then he has been an almost constant patient in the city's and state's mental health systems.

As we often do when we get together, Robert and I talked about family, and I mentioned that a cousin's son was going to be married soon, and that that there was going to be some kind of family function.

"But, Jay," Robert said, without missing a beat, "our family doesn't function."

A week later, we had dinner together in my apartment on the Upper West Side. Robert suddenly stood and started trembling, even as his smile grew wider. I said that I had not seen him smiling in this way in a long, long time. His eyes filled with tears, and he reached a hand out to me.

"I'm just so happy we can be here together, Jay, that's all," he said. "Can you understand that?"

I could. But when, this week, I read about Gov. George Pataki's new proposals to shore up the state's mental health system, drawn up in response to a series of violent attacks by people with mental illness, I didn't smile.

The governor's plans will add \$125 million to the budget for people with mental illness, largely to stop the decades-old practice of emptying the state's huge psychiatric hospitals and to provide housing with periodic supervision.

Though the governor's proposals promise to protect us from those who are violent and mentally ill, I worry that they are being seen as a real solution when they are, at best, stopgap measures. According to Alvin Pam, the director of psychology at Bronx Psychiatric Center, they "don't even begin to reverse the damage already wrought by the governor's previous budget cuts."

If the governor's objective were to do the best thing for the mentally ill -- and not merely to contain them -- he would have included more financing for the kind of care that my brother receives.

In my experience, most individuals who have long-term mental illnesses need 24-hour care, 7 days a week, in a well-supervised residence in which there are programs that offer tangible skills, along with hope that one might still be able to rejoin our world in happier, more productive ways. And this solution is often much less expensive than repeated short-term hospital stays.

Nothing less will work for these individuals. Yet the governor's plan includes no new financing whatsoever for the kind of housing Robert lives in now, or for the kinds of programs it provides. Although the state continues to finance Project Renewal, in Governor Pataki's first term, it added just 200 new beds with 24-hour supervision. Meanwhile, it continued to deinstitutionalize the mentally ill.

When people have been both out of their minds and out of this world for long periods of time, the isolation intensifies their afflictions in infinitely cruel ways. Through all my years of visiting Robert in state hospitals, halfway houses and other residences, I have usually been the only visitor in the entire institution. For most people with serious long-term mental illness, family hardly exists.

All the more reason, then, for the state to create systems that can begin to provide what families, in imperfect ways, usually provide: some sense of continuity and constancy, some sense of long-term commitment, emotional and material, some sense that what exists to nurture and nourish you today will not be gone tomorrow.

Yet there is little in the state system now, or in the new proposals, that does this.

Robert has found a home that provides a safe place for him. So why not commit to investing generously in more homes like this?

Where, in the governor's plan, is the basis for a true social contract -- a long-term commitment based not on fear, but on the real needs and desires of tens of thousands of our children and friends, our sisters and brothers?