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\$1 beyond the greater New York met

STATE PANEL SEEKS CHANGES IN HOMES FOR MENTALLY ILL

ASKS FOR MORE SPENDING

5,000 More Units of Housing Are Envisioned — an Issue in the Governor's Race

By CLIFFORD J. LEVY

ALBANY, Sept. 23 — A high-level Pataki administration panel said today that New York should largely abandon its decades-old system of adult homes for the mentally ill, and called for hundreds of millions of dollars in spending on new services and housing for residents of the homes.

The advisory panel said that to improve conditions immediately the state should begin placing as many as 1,000 nurses and trained mental-health workers in the privately run homes, which care for some 15,000 mentally ill residents.

The state should then embark on a long-term plan to create more than 5,000 units of housing, typically overseen by nonprofit groups, that would be used to relocate residents of the homes. The new housing would have less of an institutional setting and be more intent on helping the mentally ill become self-sufficient.

What remains of the system should be revamped so that the homes, some of which have more than 150 beds, would be smaller, and would not necessarily shelter only the mentally ill, the panel said.

The panel was established last May by the state health commissioner, Dr. Antonia C. Novello, after The New York Times published a series of articles that detailed a yearlong investigation into the largest homes in New York City that found that they had become little more than psychiatric flophouses. Deaths under questionable circumstances went uninvestigated, minimum-wage aides supervised residents while haphaz-

ardly distributing large amounts of psychotropic drugs, and medical fraud was common.

The panel's recommendations, which were presented at a meeting here today, were devised by administration officials in conjunction with advocacy groups and others, and include suggestions from Dr. Novello herself.

She said she had been briefing Gov. George E. Pataki daily on the panel's work and that he strongly supported the recommendations. She said the governor had cautioned, however, that the state was facing difficult fiscal times, and that he had to consider worthy proposals in other areas. But he is committed to a major overhaul, Dr. Novello said. The Legislature's approval would be needed for many of the recommendations.

"The world of the adult homes is going to change dramatically," Dr. Novello said.

Mr. Pataki's aides said he was traveling and was not available to be interviewed about the recommendations.

Some members of the panel said New York was facing a crisis in the adult homes akin to the one that it confronted with the Willowbrook scandal of the 1970's, which led to landmark changes in the state's care of retarded people.

"Adult home residents with psychiatric disabilities have finally found their time," said one panel member, Geoff Lieberman, executive director of the Coalition of Institutionalized Aged and Disabled. "This is as significant and far-reaching as what happened in the 1970's."

The coalition and a legal services group, MFY Legal Services, are among the few advocacy groups that have regularly taken up the cause of mentally ill adult home residents. Jeanette Zelhof, managing attorney at MFY, also praised the proposals.

Administration officials said the proposals could have many revisions in the coming weeks, particularly as their costs are closely examined. They said Dr. Novello would issue a final report outlining the panel's work, and plans for adopting it, at the end of October.

The state has a multibillion-dollar budget deficit in its next fiscal year, which will mean that if the governor wants the panel's work to become reality, he will have to make the hiring envisioned by the panel one of his highest priorities. The nurses and

case managers could cost as much as \$100 million annually.

The new housing is expected to take a decade to create. Its total cost could be more than \$500 million.

The recommendations represent the first significant attempt at reform of a system that arose more than 30 years ago, when New York began closing its bleak psychiatric wards under deinstitutionalization and put patients in the homes, because there was nowhere else for them to go.

The homes were intended to give the mentally ill a chance at lives in which they might have jobs, receive better care and join the mainstream. Instead, the homes became one more place where the mentally ill were abused, exploited and neglected.

By some official estimates, 15,000 mentally ill people live in more than 100 adult homes in the state, most in the New York City area; the Pataki panel used a more conservative figure of 12,000.

The Pataki panel issued its recommendations as oversight of the homes has become an issue in the governor's race. The Democratic candidate, the state comptroller, H. Carl McCall, first raised alarms about the homes in an audit that he issued in 1999. Last week, he accused Mr. Pataki of making "11th-hour, election-year promises."



Will Waldron for The New York Times

The state health commissioner, Dr. Antonia C. Novello, spoke at a briefing in Albany yesterday.

An Albany Panel Urges More Spending and Housing for the Mentally Ill

Today, Steven Greenberg, a spokesman for the McCall campaign, said Mr. Pataki, in his two terms, had cut oversight and financing for the homes.

"The governor has failed the people in these homes," Mr. Greenberg said. "While these recommendations are very important, and we would like to see them enacted, there is just very little confidence that this governor, who has tried at every turn to hurt the residents of adult homes, is going to actually follow through this

time."

Robert R. Hinckley, a Pataki spokesman, said, "No other administration has tackled this issue the way this administration has, and the governor is looking forward to determining the next steps we must take."

Mr. Pataki's chief rivals at the Statehouse, the Democratic majority in the Assembly, held hearings on the homes after The Times's articles were published. But the Democrats focused more on criticizing the governor than taking action, blocking legislation that he had proposed to toughen enforcement.

Legislative leaders of both major parties generally praised the recommendations today, while noting that they were costly. John McArdle, a spokesman for the Republican majority in the Senate, said, "It's an important need that we must address."

Assemblyman Martin A. Luster, an upstate Democrat who is chairman of the Mental Health Committee, said: "The question is implementation. Will the governor have the courage to raise the money to implement it?"

At the heart of the panel's short-term recommendations are proposals to hire nurses to distribute medication in the homes, and mental-health workers to supervise closely the services that the residents are receiving.

Some homes distribute hundreds if not thousands of pills of psychotropic and other medications daily; the state says the average resident takes six to nine medications a day. For years, state inspectors have found chaotic medication practices at the homes, with residents sometimes becoming sick after receiving the

FULL REPORT ON ADULT HOMES

The panel's full report on the proposed changes is online at www.nytimes.com/nyregion.

wrong pills. The operators of the homes say they have received so little money from the state that they cannot afford to hire nurses.

The homes' residents have long been exploited in medical schemes to make money. A recent state report, echoing findings in The Times's articles, concluded that many of the services received by residents were wasteful or fraudulent. The report said Medicaid pays more than \$27,000 annually for services for the average resident in the New York City area.

Under the recommendations, a squad of state-financed mental health workers would be stationed in the homes and charged with making sure residents were not being exploited and were receiving proper care.

The panel called for the state to finance more than 5,000 new housing units in the next decade, reasoning that many of the residents would flourish in other, less institutional settings. The units would range from private apartments visited regularly by case managers to supported housing developments, which include social services on site.

Leon Hofman, who represented the adult-home operators on the panel, said the homes were not averse to the housing proposals. But he said he hoped that as the state revamped the system, officials would understand that the homes would require financial help so they could reorganize.