

Staten Island Advance

# Second front

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## Future bleak for mental health care

### Island programs face massive cuts from both city and state

By REGINALD PATRICK  
ADVANCE CITY HALL BUREAU

The combined impact of deep state and city funding cuts could turn back the clock on mental health programs on Staten Island, leaving thousands at risk of not being able to find adequate services, warn providers and lawmakers.

"This is completely unacceptable," said North Shore Assembly-

woman Elizabeth Connelly. "People will be out on the streets. You'll be stepping over them. The weaker programs will simply be forced to close."

Gov. George Pataki's barebones budget proposes a \$142 million reduction in mental health funding.

At the same time, Mayor Rudolph W. Giuliani has proposed slashing \$8 million from mental

health contracts over the next four years. The city proposes to eliminate \$2 million in mental health funding in the spending plan to take effect July 1.

Depending on who's doing the talking, there appears to be at least a glimmer of hope on the city scene.

Some observers feel the city reduction stands a chance of being

rescinded—at least in part. That prediction is based on the successful battle city lawmakers mounted this year to get City Hall to restore vital money for mental retardation and substance abuse services.

But the proposed state cut is another matter, with some state lawmakers conceding it looks like a considerably heavier lift.

As city lawmakers tinker at the margins of Mayor Rudolph W. Giuliani's proposed \$30 billion budget over the next several months, finding the \$2 million to

### The Budget impact:

#### HEALTH CARE

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plug the mental health hole for next year should not be viewed as an insurmountable task, said North Shore Democrat Jerome X. O'Donovan, a member of the finance committee.

"I think the mayor understands mental health is a priority for us, that we're prepared to really battle for this," O'Donovan said.

In fact there is a budget scenario in this town that runs like this: City Hall will allow the Council to negotiate for some restorations in mental health, youth services and cultural programs but will hold fast on the more than \$1 billion in cuts to entitlements the budget office has spelled out.

One budget source claimed that the mayor simply put the youth,

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cultural and mental health cuts out there to distract city lawmakers from putting up too strong a fight over entitlements, including public assistance.

"It will give the Council a needed small victory," a source said.

South Shore Republican Vito Fossella Jr. stressed that a city budget is never etched in stone but is a matter of negotiation, give and take. And he predicts negotiated changes before the final spending plan is approved at the end of June.

A spokesman for the office of Mid-Island Republican John A. Fusco said, "We plan to fight for appropriate restorations when the Council budget hearings begin." Fusco is a member of the Health Committee.

"One key person in the city budget negotiations will be Brooklyn's Una Clarke, chairwoman of the subcommittee on mental health.

Recently she has met with mental health providers from around the city to assess the potential damage of the city and state cuts and vowed "to speak for those New Yorkers who cannot speak for themselves" — namely the people receiving those services.

"Many of these programs are the life blood of a community," she said. "Our neediest and most vulnerable residents must be a priority. This administration has to show more compassion for these people."

Recently the Staten Island Mental Health Council, a coalition of service providers here, met in emergency session to plan strategy on how to fight the proposed city and state cuts.

The council was successful in getting City Hall to restore more than \$10 million for mental retardation and alcohol abuse services that had been slashed from the budget.

North Shore Assemblywoman Connelly, who has been instrumental over the years in helping build a mental health infrastructure in this borough, pulled no punches in outlining the seriousness of the proposed state cuts, which she charged will set the mental health system back a generation.

The assemblywoman said she planned to write to Gov. Pataki and Manhattan Assemblyman Sheldon Silver, speaker of the Assembly.

"I just hope the protests and demonstrations don't fall on deaf ears," she said.

Democratic Assemblyman Eric Vitaliano said the providers hard hit by the belt-tightening will be the key in the effort to change the direction of the Pataki administration.

"The people have to make the case," Vitaliano said. Describing the proposed reductions as "meat cleaver cuts," Vitaliano said the battle to overturn the plan is complicated by the fact that the Republican-controlled Senate appears ready, willing and able to rubber-stamp the Pataki plan.

Republican Assemblyman Robert Stranieri parted company with his Democratic colleagues on the proposed cuts, charging some providers with succumbing to hysteria.

"We're not going from spending money to spending zero," Stranieri said. "We're just saying we can't afford to fund at the same level." The Staten Island lawmaker said there is no reason anyone who needs services should be denied if programs use available resources efficiently.

But Stranieri — joining the general outcry raised by his Democratic colleagues — did blast the proposed state cut to Staten Island's Institute for Basic Research (IBR).

"It's being asked to absorb an inordinate cut," Stranieri said.

A proposed \$4.7 million reduction in funding could cost the facility more than 100 research positions. The facility performs research into mental retardation, developmental disabilities, genetic disorders and Alzheimer's disease.

A spokesman for state Sen. John Marchi's office said the senior Republican lawmaker will "do all he can to minimize the impact of the (mental health) cuts."

The compulsive gambler's clinic at St. Vincent's Medical Center is slated for elimination. The \$430,000 in funding for that facility and two others like it upstate is being completely cut.

Program director Don Thoms said he could not overlook the irony of the state's projecting that a special video lottery will bring in \$100 million a year but claiming it has no money to treat compulsive gamblers who represent between 2 and 5 percent of the general population.

Philip Saperia, director of the Coalition of Voluntary Mental Health Agencies, predicted that some 12,000 former clients of structured mental health projects will be turned loose on the city's streets unsupervised.

"This is a potential catastrophe," he said. "People should understand the devastating social impact of all this."

"That's really all we can say, at this point," said Gerry McLaughlin.

Roger Kungman, a spokesman for the state mental health office, said the proposed reductions had only been drawn in broad outline and it would be too early to tell how they would impact specific programs.

But Dr. Kenneth Popler, executive director of the Staten Island Mental Health Society, a veteran of past battles to restore mental retardation service dollars, predicted a 6 to 8 percent hit on his mental health program.

That would come to about \$120,000 and mean the loss of some clinical staff and the elimination of services for about 200 families, he said. Families might also have to wait longer to get services.

"That's not good care," Dr. Popler said. "People in urgent straits need to be seen on an urgent basis."

Kathleen Levantahl of the psychiatric department of Staten Island University Hospital said cuts in outpatient programs will have a "domino effect," applying more pressure for more expensive inpatient services.