

NY'S UNFINISHED BUSINESS

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industry leaders, advocates and policy experts on the magnitude of the effort ultimately required to provide relief from the housing pressures felt by too many New York City households.

The Mayor's "New Housing Marketplace" plan is an important new commitment, but his preliminary FY 2005 budget projects a \$1.3 billion decrease in the investment of city capital funds in housing over the next 10 years. Even with new funding from the city's Housing Development Corporation, long-term commitments are still \$800 million below FY 2002. That's 10,000 to 15,000 units of housing that will not be built or saved over the next ten years!

As the city's economic and budget situation improve, we must expand the scope of the mayor's initiative to reach the goals of the Housing First! plan. This means that, in the years ahead, we need to create more housing for working New Yorkers and not overlook the housing needs of our vulnerable neighbors—senior citizens, homeless families, and individuals with special needs.

In the meantime, there are a number of ways we can increase funding for housing by prudently redirecting funds the city already receives. For example, the city receives federal dollars to manage and renovate abandoned city-owned buildings. But, the city has sold-off most of these buildings, freeing-up money that could be used to build and rehab more affordable housing.

Administrative, zoning, and regulatory reforms can also boost the creation of decent housing for working families. The Bloomberg administration has taken important steps to advance some of those reforms supported by Housing First! The city's progress on streamlining the building code and improving the way we plan for public land should simplify and promote housing production. Further, the administration has taken bold steps to rezone parts of the city to increase land available for residential development.

But we have more to do. We need new programs and zoning laws that ensure that major redevelopment efforts create housing affordable to all New Yorkers. And, we must rethink our outdated zoning resolution to remove barriers to building housing at the densities appropriate to our neighborhoods.

The challenge of housing a vibrant, growing city is formidable, but our city's leaders are right to take it on. After all, according to a recent survey by the National Association of Realtors, 76% of New Yorkers say housing affordability is an important issue for them when they vote on Election Day. A sustained and comprehensive effort is essential to ensuring that all New Yorkers have a safe, decent, affordable place to call home. ■

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COALITION FIGHTS HUMAN RIGHTS ABUSES

BY LEAH GITTER

Dear National Alliance For The Mentally Ill (NAMI) Friends,

Of all the critical issues facing the mental health community, one of the most neglected is the high incarceration rate of people with a psychiatric disability. We are in a CRISIS situation in New York State. It is important for the mental health community to acknowledge the crisis and help put a stop to the inhuman treatment that is taking place in the New York State Department of Correctional Services.

I have been advocating for my family members for more than seven years. Rarely does a day go by when I don't think about these questions. I am trying to find an explanation of why the situation has gotten so harsh and devastating for all those involved.

Why did Judge McLaughlin give my family member a 2 1/2 to 20-year sentence, thinking he would get the treatment he needed in prison?

Why is there such a disproportionate number of people with mental illness kept in solitary housing units, which confines them to a 9 x 6 cell 23 hours a day?

Why do our elected and public officials continue to support the housing of human beings in such extreme restraints? Why do they think it is a solution to behavior problems, which are caused by a brain disorder?

There are at least 8,000 prisoners with psychiatric disabilities in the New York State Department of Correctional Services (DOCS) and 25-50% of these prisoners are in Special Housing Units (SHU) for punishment for disciplinary infractions.

New York is a national leader in the use of solitary confinement, and this vulnerable population is receiving the full brunt of this punishment.

I am connected to NAMI through the criminal justice support group. The support group has been an anchor for me from the very beginning. In 1996, the criminalization issue was barely on the agenda. There was some attention being paid to the mental health services needed in jails and prisons, but there was no public awareness that the prison system in this country was out of control. The focus of the group gives us the energy to deal with the insurmountable problems that we are faced with continually.

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**“
We are committed to making change, through social action, to stop the criminalization of people with psychiatric disabilities.**”