

TESTIMONY
PRESENTED TO:
NEW YORK STATE DIVISION OF BUDGET
ON
HOUSING FOR PEOPLE WITH DEVELOPMENTAL DISABILITIES
DECEMBER 2007
SUBMITTED BY:
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First, I want to thank you for your support of people with developmental disabilities, their families and the agencies that support them. As you know, New York is leading the nation in the development of community services and supports for people with mental retardation and developmental disabilities, particularly through development initiatives like NYS-CARES.

NYSACRA is the largest statewide association of its kind, comprised of over 200 voluntary agencies providing services to persons with mental retardation and developmental disabilities. Our grassroots approach keeps us in touch with our members and their concerns. Housing is one of the areas of critical concern to NYSACRA members – thank you for inviting me to meet with you to provide NYSACRA’s perspective.

Essentially, there has been great optimism in this field and in New York as we have implemented NYS-CARES. This waiting list initiative was much needed by aging parents who took care of their sons and daughters at home and who needed support as health and aging issues arose. NYS-CARES has been a realization of a dream for many people and its continuation each year eases the minds of families and people with disabilities. In addition, it has provided the opportunity to “right-size” larger settings to smaller and more individualized ones. For this landmark initiative, we commend you and New York State for the leadership. It not only addresses the waiting list, but also offers a planned approach and a process for accomplishing those goals, as well as providing funds to do so. The NYS-CARES initiative recognizes the need for continued planned congregate care

opportunities for individuals who desire it and who are aging and need more supports, while also promoting flexibility through a person centered planning process.

NYSACRA has long been committed to the values and principles of person centered planning and consumer choice. NYSACRA promotes the concepts aimed at building person centered options that will result in effective and enduring improvements and flexibility in community long-term support systems. We are implementing two DDPC funded projects: a Learning Institute on Individualized Supports and an Individualized Shared Living initiative to help providers move toward creative, innovative supports. These options, in addition to existing options, will allow agencies to be more responsive to the changing needs of families and people with disabilities.

A necessary component of providing services to people with developmental disabilities is access to affordable housing. This is essential to accomplishing the important goal of integration of individuals with disabilities into typical neighborhoods and communities. There are multiple factors that contribute to individuals with disabilities being unable to locate and secure decent, affordable, and accessible housing of their choosing. This limited access to affordable housing is in part a product of the following:

- (1) The financial capabilities of individuals with disabilities;
- (2) The complex and multi jurisdictional requirements for accessing affordable housing often act as a barrier for individuals with disabilities.
- (3) The available supply, volatile market and future production of public and private affordable housing;
- (4) The significant loss of units of federally subsidized public and assisted housing in the last few years that is available to individuals with disabilities;
- (5) Historical formal and informal discrimination toward individuals with mental retardation and other disabilities,
- (6) Delays in the approval process used by state government.
- (7) transportation is a major issue for people with disabilities and the direct support professional staff that support them -getting from home to work and work to home and access to community involvement.

Priced Out in 2006, a study from the Technical Assistance Collaborative, Inc. by the Consortium for Citizens with Disabilities, Housing Task Force found that:

- “In 2006 – for the first time – national average rents for both one-bedroom and efficiency units were more than the entire monthly income of an individual relying solely on SSI income. As growth in the cost of modest rental housing continued to outpace cost-of-living increases in SSI payments, the national average rent for a one-bedroom apartment rose to 113.1 percent of monthly SSI – up from 109.6 percent in 2004. Studio/efficiency rents rose above monthly SSI payments for the first time, topping out at 100.1 percent as a national average compared to 96.1 percent in 2004.” *In New York, the percent of SSI needed to rent a studio apartment is 126.6% and 137.5% for a one-bedroom apartment.*
- “From 2004-2006, people with disabilities who relied on SSI as their source of income descended further into poverty. In 2006, the annual income of a single individual receiving SSI payments was \$7,584 – equal to only 18.2 percent of the national median income for a one-person household and almost 25 percent below the federal poverty level.” *In New York, the percent is 19.2.*
- “Since the first *Priced Out* study was published in 1998, the value of SSI payments relative to median income has declined precipitously – from 24.4 percent of median income in 1998 to 18.2 percent in 2006 – while national average rents have skyrocketed. The national average rent for a modest one-bedroom unit rose from \$462 in 1998 to \$715 in 2006 – an increase of 55 percent.
- Discretionary state SSI supplements provided by 21 states are not the solution to the housing affordability problems experienced by people with disabilities living on SSI payments. The State of Alaska – which has the highest state SSI supplement of \$362 and a total monthly SSI payment of \$965 – best illustrates this finding. In Alaska in 2006, people with disabilities receiving SSI still needed to pay 77 percent of their monthly income to rent a modest one-bedroom unit.” *In New York, there is an \$87.00 state supplement for people with disabilities living independently.*

Priced Out in 2006 uses a very simple but compelling methodology to measure the severity of the housing affordability problems experienced by people with disabilities in today’s rental housing market. By comparing HUD Fair Market Rents with the purchasing power of monthly SSI payments – including state SSI supplements – one can ask the question whether a single adult receiving SSI can obtain affordable housing in the current rental housing market. Unfortunately, the

answer to this question is a resounding “no” in every single one of the nation’s metropolitan and non-metropolitan housing market areas.

In addition I would like to say a few words about the need for affordable housing for direct support professionals, the workers that provide services every day to people with disabilities and who are as close as family to people with developmental disabilities. NYSACRA encourages OMRDD and the NYS DoB to continue their support of efforts to increase the wages of direct support professionals in voluntary not-for-profit agencies and to make the work that they do a valued career. There is a critical need to raise awareness about the individuals who perform one of the most demanding jobs in this state and typically are paid the lowest wages for the job they do - the direct support professional. It is sad that after finishing their job at the group home, many direct support workers head to a second place of employment. Why? Because their salary for having certain skills and providing needed supports does not pay enough for them to meet their own needs. This without a doubt applies to their housing needs. According the National Low Income Housing Coalition’s “Out of Reach” study in 2006, the average Fair Market Rent in New York State for a two-bedroom apartment is \$1,076.00. In order to afford this level of rent and utilities, without paying more than 30% of income on housing, a household must earn \$3,588 monthly or \$43,051 annually. Assuming a 40-hour workweek, 52 weeks per year, this level of income translates into an Hourly Wage of \$20.70. Our DSP’s, on the average, earn far less than twenty-one dollars an hour. This means that much of our workforce is unable to live in the communities in which they work, and if they do, they are working two or three jobs to make ends meet. The proportion of pay/benefits that goes to housing and the increase in housing cost, along with increases in food, energy, etc., has made it harder than ever before to obtain or sustain self-sufficiency. It is also worth mentioning that finding affordable housing often requires living far from work, which creates another set of problems like additional gas and car costs, as well as, less time with family.

Recommendations: It is important that there be a thoughtful, well-planned comprehensive approach to housing policy for people with developmental disabilities and the agencies that serve them both in New York and nationally. There is a strong and compelling reason to provide affordable and accessible housing to people with disabilities – it is their right to live in the community and to be included in their communities, not to be marginalized and segregated. There

is a need to expand available housing stock, particularly finding single level dwellings as people age and wish to remain in community homes.

Strategies

1. Explore creative solutions that allow individuals with disabilities access to very low interest rates. For example, the state can guarantee backing of individual mortgages to reduce the financial institutions' risk.
2. Provide housing subsidies and exemptions from minimum-income requirements to enable individuals to qualify for government-sponsored rentals and sales. NYS Housing Finance Agency (HFA) sponsors 80/20 rentals, in which 20% of the units are reserved for low-income individuals; in New York City, the Department of Housing Preservation and Development (HPD) offers city-sponsored affordable homes for purchase. People with disabilities on SSI or SSDI do not even qualify for the income minimums for the renter/buyer. Thus, to acquire this affordable housing, low-income individuals with developmental disabilities may need a subsidy and an exemption from income requirements. This strategy requires partnership with NYS HFA, NYC HPD, and possibly other agencies as well.
3. Speed up the OMRDD approval process; fast-track proposals that have property identified. Most sellers refuse to wait the six months or more it often takes for all approvals, and properties are lost.

Thank you for allowing NYSACRA the time to present comments to you on housing in New York and to participate in planning for the future. I applaud you for developing an on-going dialogue with not-for-profit providers, parents and families and with people with developmental disabilities and government.