



# Suffolk County Voter

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October 2009

Wed. Oct. 21: LWVSC Board Meeting, 10:00am-12 noon, Riverhead Library

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## League Members Assist at 1<sup>st</sup> CD Town Hall Meeting on Healthcare Reform

Congressman Tim Bishop (1<sup>st</sup> CD, NY) held a second town hall meeting on healthcare reform on Thursday, August 27, at Sachem High School in Farmingville. Approximately 900 people filled the auditorium, and there were reports that as many as 500 more were turned away for lack of space. At the Congressman's request, members of the League of Women Voters assisted by distributing and collecting question cards, and vetting questions to assure that a mixture of viewpoints and issues were aired by residents of the 1<sup>st</sup> CD.

It is clear that the issue of healthcare reform provokes intense feelings and opinions. After an earlier town hall meeting it was reported that the Congressman was heckled; his office then announced that further town meetings would be suspended until a method could be found to hold the meeting in an orderly and safe fashion. The League is proud to have been part of the solution which allowed this town hall meeting to proceed.

At the Sachem meeting, mediator and Southampton Village Justice Andrea

Schiavoni skillfully moderated, balancing the need of members of the audience to express themselves with the goal of conducting a session at which questions could be posed to the Congressman in an atmosphere of civility and respectful discourse. Those goals were, for the most part, met. The Congressman was able to answer the concerns of many of his constituents and to explain his views on various aspects of the proposed bills. Tempers flared at times, and certain audience members shouted out in an attempt to interrupt both the Congressman and the questioners. Yet, although answers to the questions often provoked cheers and jeers from the assembly, for the most part, decorum was maintained.

The League's method of vetting questions contributed to the success of the evening. As we collected questions, we were able to assure audience members that we were not associated with Congressman Bishop's office, and that we were there to ensure that a mixture of viewpoints were aired, and that the major issues were covered. *continued page 2*

## LWV Presentation to SC Legislature Health and Human Services Committee Meeting LWVSC Co-President Katherine Hoak's Remarks of September 10, 2009

### SUFFOLK COUNTY MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES

Our mental health system is comprehensive in its scope, but is challenged by the great demands made on it, especially in the areas of emergency, inpatient and outpatient services, and appropriate housing. Suffolk County's system is unique because we had three very large psychiatric institutions. One of them, Kings Park, was considered to be the largest mental health facility in the United States. There were wards to deal with mentally ill veterans, and with those with forensic problems. We can assume that clients who would have been placed there are now residing in our jails, a far more expensive alternative. It is because of this reality that the League of Women Voters of Suffolk County became involved. We have a position in support of alternatives to incarceration, programs which provide much needed services for people who become involved with the criminal justice system because of their mental illnesses.

In the 1980s, when NYS determined to close these institutions, their clients—most of whom were from New York City and elsewhere in the state and in the country—were dispersed onto the streets of Suffolk County. Because so many of the patients had been institutionalized for many years, sending them "back home" was not possible.

In addition, NYS was to send financial support to counties to deal adequately with the needs of these patients. Instead of dispensing with the funding according to the needs of counties, though, it gave funding to all counties, regardless of need. This is equivalent to Homeland Security sending funding to North Pole, Alaska along the same line as it did to New York City! We continue to suffer greatly from, what I would call, political shenanigans. *continued page 2*

**Town Hall Meeting** *continued*

Newsday described the two-hour meeting as “raucous”. That description fails to take into consideration the full scope of what happened that night. Ms. Schiavoni and the members of the League who attended saw a wonderful example of democracy in action. Ms Schiavoni described her perception as follows:

*“There was a knowledgeable public servant making himself available to answer questions from constituents. There was a passionate, interested crowd of constituents with real questions to ask of their Congressman. The League of Women Voters was there to protect the process in terms of fairness and neutrality, and the tenets of civility were the only restraints on the participants’ rights to free speech and peaceably to*

*assemble. Personally, it was a patriotic experience of a lifetime.”*

The evening also represented a terrific example of the Suffolk County ILO in action. League members from Brookhaven (Nancy Marr, Betsy Gaidry, and Peggy Olness), Smithtown (Joyce Rosenthal and Lisa Scott) and the Hamptons (Judy Samuelson, Sue Avedon, Glorian Berk, and Carol Mellor) were all in attendance and all worked to help the evening succeed. The League of Women Voters works at making democracy work, and this town meeting was a stellar example of this organization at its best.

*Carol Mellor*

**K.Hoak Remarks** *continued*

After the hospital closings, an emergency hospital system was developed around a Comprehensive Psychiatric Emergency Program (CPEP) at Stony Brook University Hospital. True, this is a state facility, but it provides services for County residents. CPEP was to be the centralized receiving hospital for the most serious situations. Over time, though, obviously limited space there, along with delays in the necessary transfers to other facilities because of insufficient bed capacity, has caused serious problems within that system. This has been compounded further by the additional reduction in beds for psychiatric patients, as at St. Catherine’s and Southside. Also, there are growing needs for services.

Suffolk County has no county hospital, as does Nassau. The Nassau County Hospital has 130 beds for psychiatric patients, essentially filled fulltime. In Suffolk, no matter what the crisis is, the thinking is to take the client to CPEP. Suffolk’s system for dealing with the mental health crises of its residents face is fragmented. It has to deal with domestic violence, with drug and alcohol abuse difficulties, along with a wide assortment of other extreme problems. Community hospitals are not equipped to deal with many of such crises.

Mental health housing is a critical factor in our system. This housing includes:

- 368 **Community Residence** beds (24-hour per day supervision)
- 192 **CR-SRO** beds (single room occupancy with on-site supports)
- 8 service planning beds within the CR-SRO residence that are specifically designated for temporary stay pending more permanent housing placement following acute psychiatric hospitalization
- 218 **apartment treatment** beds (apartment living with regular support visits)
- 1160 **supported housing** beds (apartment living with less frequent support visits)

Of the above beds, 129 are reserved for applicants coming directly from state operated housing.

As of September 3, 2009, the current **overall wait list is 403 people.**

Of the 403 people waiting for housing, there are:

- 79 **homeless** (shelter, street, jail, doubling up with family and friends)
- 87 **System Movement** (from hospital to housing, across levels of mental health housing, etc.)
- 34 **pending homeless** (facing eviction/foreclosure)
- 203 **inadequate housing** (with parents, family, sober housing, room & board)

Of all **403** on the wait list:

- 94 **applications** represent couples or families
- 36 require housing for individuals with both mental illness and substance abuse problems
- 8 need **handicap supports**
- 3 require housing for both conditions of **mental illness and mental retardation**

**It is important to note that there are many people currently held in hospitals because there is no available housing for them.**

Outpatient treatment services are the least intensive level of services, where, hopefully, people in crisis can walk into clinics and receive service. However, because demand greatly exceeds supply, only a fraction of the individuals requesting services at any one time can be accommodated. Priority must be given to those referred by hospital emergency rooms and psychiatric units. Because of this lack of access, many people have nowhere else to go. As with physical health, when there is nowhere to go with relatively minor symptoms, one goes to the emergency room when in crisis. **When mental symptoms increase and intensify, ultimately CPEP is often the only route to go.**

Suffolk County, currently dealing with the deeply-felt lack of adequate resources, is facing two additional, inevitable crises. Additional adult homes will be closed because of their profound inadequacies. Far greater will be the impact beginning in October from the reform of the Rockefeller Drug Law. I heard of this great concern at the CJCC meeting I attended last week.

The League is encouraged by your including CPEP in your capital budget. I and several other League members saw CPEP. We were startled and appalled by its physical inadequacies. We expect the expansion will provide the greatly-needed upgrade in that part of our mental health system.

*Katherine Hoak*

*These remarks were given in conjunction with those of Dr. Mark Sedler, Chair of Psychiatry and Behavioral Science at Stony Brook University, who gave a comprehensive presentation on CPEP.*