



Staten Island Advance

Legislators vow to help youths needing mental-health care

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STATEN ISLAND, N.Y. -- After listening to the gripping tale of a West Brighton mother whose at-risk children received inadequate emergency mental health care, two state lawmakers pledged to reach across the aisle to craft legislation mandating age-appropriate aid in the borough.

State Sen. Andrew Lanza (R-Staten Island) and Assemblyman Matthew Titone (D-North Shore) said they'd meet with the mother, Joyce Baldassarri, and other mental health advocates to learn how they can ensure that Staten Island kids get the help they need here.

Titone said he would take the lead on the issue, and Lanza pledged his support.

At a luncheon yesterday sponsored by Families on the Move of NYC in the Renaissance, Grant City, Ms. Baldassarri tearfully described how her at-risk son was sent to an off-Island facility and her teen-age daughter placed with adults during separate mental health crises her family faced in recent years.

"Shame on us," said Lanza, who was honored by the organization for sending state monies its way for an after-school program. "Matt said to me, 'We need to do something legislatively.' He and I are united in this. You have our commitment and we will not let you down."

"This is an organization that approaches mental health challenges in a holistic manner," Titone told the Advance. "When you approach it as a challenge rather than a problem, you are approaching it in a positive light."

The citywide group, founded last year, has a partnership here with the Jewish Board of Families and the Parent Resource Center.

Located in New Springville, the local offshoot wants to relocate to a larger space in Travis, to provide the at-risk population of about 20 teens it serves with additional after-school offerings.

An array of services is currently provided, including workshops on social skills and job placement, counseling, tutoring and local outings. Dinner and snacks are also offered, along with Metro Cards.

Liberian native Kpangb Poppo, 13, called the program an important part of his life.

"It gives you good things to do, so you are not in the street with bad people," said Kpangb. "You learn responsibility."

Andres Meeks, 15, said his love of art and drawing has been furthered by his participation in the program.

"They take care of you," said Andres. "You learn a whole lot."

"We put a lot of love into it," said youth group facilitator Zerina Quinones.

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