

COUNTY OF SUFFOLK

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SUFFOLK APPROVES CREATION OF NETWORK OF SAFE SOBER HOMES

Eliminating Fraud, Waste, Abuse and Protecting the Vulnerable



Riverhead, NY – Many unregulated sober homes, instead of helping individuals in need of safe, alcohol and drug-free housing in Suffolk County, have been a detriment to people in recovery and a danger to those living there.

Over the last several decades law makers have grappled with the challenges of creating a system that is safe for people in recovery, affordable for taxpayers, and accepted by surrounding communities. Today the Suffolk County Legislator approved introductory resolution 1758-10, sponsored by Legislator Kate Browning (WF-Shirley), which seeks to address the lack of regulated sober homes in Suffolk County.

“Today the Suffolk County Legislature took a major step to begin the regulation of sober homes, and hopefully, the elimination of rogue sober homes that were profiled in the Welfare to Work Commission’s May report on this topic,” stated Richard Koubek, Chair, Welfare to Work Commission of the Suffolk County legislature. “In the absence of State action, the adoption of this resolution was an act of courage and foresight on the part of Legislator Kate Browning and her colleagues.”

Last week Legislator Browning was joined by State Senator Brian Foley (D-Blue Point), Assemblymen Marc Alessi (D-Shoreham) and Fred Thiele (I-Sag Harbor), members of Suffolk County’s Welfare to Work Commission, the drug treatment community, and civic leaders to call for the passage Browning’s legislation. The resolution directs Suffolk County’s Department of Social Services (DSS) to start the process of setting

meaningful standards for sober homes by issuing a request for qualifications (RFQ) for sober home providers in Suffolk County.

There are currently no regulations or oversight for sober homes in New York State. The result has been an underground network of landlords who prey on vulnerable individuals in need of housing. The majority of these homes do not encourage sobriety, operate strictly for profit on the taxpayer's dime, and leave a major gap in the treatment and recovery for those people on the path to becoming productive citizens. Many of these homes have become havens for crime, drug and alcohol abuse, and have led to many relapses.

"We cannot continue to focus on prevention and rehabilitation while ignoring the need for good recovery housing," stated Legislator Browning. "When a recovering addict spends all day in treatment, their efforts are completely wasted if they return to a home environment where drugs are rampant. This has become a vicious cycle and many individuals are losing the battle."

"With the rise in drug abuse among teens it could be anyone's baby living in one of these so called "sober" homes," stated Kathy Liguori, Vice Chair of the Welfare to Work Commission. "Child care was easily regulated long ago to protect a vulnerable population and we can no longer turn our backs to this vulnerable population as well. Legislator Browning's legislation is the "first steps" in creating a quality standard."

"It's a shame that a few rotten-apple landlords are taking advantage of the system when renting to recovering addicts, wasting thousands of dollars in County funds," stated Assemblyman Alessi. "Not only are they taking taxpayers for a ride, they are also denying this vulnerable group of people the tools necessary for them to get better, which starts with a safe place to live. I commend Legislator Browning for standing up for their rights, and for the rights of Suffolk taxpayers, who are already overburdened in these trying economic times."

Introductory resolution 1758-10 requires the advertisement of an RFQ to identify organizations and individuals qualified to operate safe, effective, drug-free sober homes. Thus, DSS would create a network of sober home providers that would receive referrals from DSS and other agencies that deal directly with those in recovery. Only qualified homes would receive DSS funding. This would guarantee that taxpayer dollars are being spent wisely. Homes operated by good organizations do not have a negative impact on surrounding communities. The lack of action from OASAS to address this problem, which it is charged to do, has caused many counties to look for local solutions.

"LICADD supports this important effort to address a long-standing deficiency in the continuum of care for those with addictions," stated Jeff Reynolds, Executive Director of the Long Island Council on Alcohol and Drug Dependence. "The Welfare to Work Commission drew an important distinction between legitimate sober homes that deserve our support, and overcrowded, unsafe residences run by unscrupulous landlords looking to make a quick buck at the expense of our communities. We praise Legislator Browning for taking action and strengthening recovery housing options for Suffolk residents particularly as we look for safe, sober, affordable options for an increasing number of young men and women who have traveled the road of heroin addiction."

The Welfare to Work Commission and Legislator Browning held public hearings in October of 2009 to address this long standing problem. The commission issued a report in March 2010 that outlined several recommendations. Many of the recommendations require state action, so Legislator Browning has worked with Senator Foley, Assemblyman Thiele, and Assemblyman Alessi to introduce key pieces of legislation in Albany. However, the report also noted that other states have created networks of sober home providers, and New York should look to mirror these efforts. Legislator Browning's proposal does that for Suffolk County.

"Providing residents who are trying to get their lives back in order with places to live that are free from potential temptations is essential," said Senator Brian X. Foley. "I commend Legislator Browning for introducing this resolution, which will help ensure that taxpayer money is going towards providing this kind of safe environment. It fits hand-in-hand with the legislation I have sponsored at the state level regarding sober homes. By working together at every level of government, we can protect taxpayer money while supporting our neighbors in their struggle to break addictions."

"I have sponsored legislation since 2001 which would provide for the regulation, oversight, and operation of sober homes by New York State," said Assemblyman Fred Thiele. "This is an important quality of life issue that we need to find a solution for. It has been my privilege to work with Legislator Browning on this issue and support her proposal today. I pledge to continue to work with my Assembly colleague, Assemblywoman Amy Paulin, Chair of the Assembly Alcoholism and Drug Abuse Committee, on addressing unregulated sober homes in New York State during the coming Legislative Session."

“As the Chair of the Assembly Alcoholism and Drug Abuse Committee, I am committed to ensuring that individuals recovering from alcoholism and substance abuse have a safe, drug-free place to live,” stated Assemblywoman Amy Paulin (D-Westchester). “It is important that recovering addicts are not forced into an environment that will jeopardize their sobriety or safety, and this resolution aims to prevent that.”

Legislator Browning has discussed her proposal with Assemblywoman Amy Paulin and Suffolk County’s state legislators who have all voiced their support to implement this idea statewide.

“Suffolk County has always taken a leadership role in implementing innovative ways to address long-standing problems,” concluded Browning. “Today we have again taken a pro-active approach that sets an example for other county’s throughout New York State, and more importantly for OASAS, which has failed to address a major deficiency in a system it is supposed to be regulating.”

The law directs DSS to advertise the RFQ within 60 days of its passage.

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