

Advocacy Committee Report - September 2019

REACH Advocacy continues to participate in collaborative actions of advocacy on behalf of those who are housing deprived in our region. We have a seat on the Homeless Services Network Advocacy Committee that meets monthly.

During the summer we contributed to two significant public policy items:

1. Feedback to the City of Rochester's 2034 Comprehensive Plan:

Representatives from REACH Advocacy's Tiny Home Committee submitted feedback to the **City of Rochester on their 2034 Comprehensive Plan** which is a blueprint for how the City of Rochester will manage development and spend its resources over the next 15 years. REACH Advocacy requested that more supportive and specific language surrounding the building of Tiny Home(s) and/or a Tiny Home Village as a means of addressing those that are housing poor be included in the 2034 planning document.

The following are some of our suggested additions to the 2034 Comprehensive Plan:

Housing: Stable housing is vital for the overall health and well-being of individuals and the community.

Rationale: Men and Women who don't have stable housing have an increased risk of struggling with poor health outcomes and material hardships, such as food insecurity and increased odds of adverse health outcomes. Decent, affordable housing leads to improvement in both physical and mental health. A housing program for the homeless can reduce the costs of public services such as medical services, temporary shelter, and costs associated with arrests and incarceration.

Statement: Two growing American problems are housing insecurity and unaffordability.

Rationale: Federal housing assistance reaches but a fraction of the ever growing number of low income household needs. Low income households have increasingly few housing options due to the shortage of subsidized housing and the ongoing loss of low cost rentals. Tiny home(s) can provide an inexpensive shelter for the homeless and the hard to house. Tiny home(s) can be a solution to ameliorate homelessness.

Statement: Tiny Home(s) meet the need for affordable housing for those who are housing poor.

Rationale: Creation of Tiny Homes in a Tiny Home Village of sustainable, high quality, energy efficient 300 -500 sq. ft. buildings provide homes in a permanent, supportive village atmosphere for housing vulnerable persons. This village concept would encourage residents to engage in communal life, enhance the quality of their lives, interact with service providers, and assist them in becoming contributing citizens of our city while in some cases working towards home ownership.

Statement: A Tiny Home Village creates an atmosphere for communal engagement.

Rationale: In a tiny home village, residents who may have been isolated from others are now able to connect to one another and carve out a legal space to exist within the city and begin to contribute to the city in meaningful ways. The tiny home village combines housing with a number of amenities and activities essential to making a person flourish such as physical and decision-making control over the environment, physical and mental health outreach, healthy food opportunities, sustainable living practices, work opportunities, interaction with service

providers and connections with surrounding neighbors. This model could easily be replicated on additional vacant lots in the city.

Statement: Establishment of a Tiny Home village sets the next stage for addressing environmental and joblessness factors of urban poverty.

Rationale: Manufacturing tiny home(s) with the help of Youth Build and other work training programs will provide job training and educational opportunities for at risk youth while assisting in the construction of affordable housing for low income or homeless people in our community. Practical application of construction skills creating affordable tiny homes will equip participants to be job ready at the end of their training.

Zoning:

Creating tiny homes and villages requires changes or exceptions to local zoning codes. A variety of specific zoning change suggestions were outlined in REACH's feedback to allow for the construction of Tiny Homes in the City of Rochester.

2. Letter to the Governor

The Honorable Andrew M. Cuomo
Governor of New York State
New York State Capitol Building
Albany New York 12224

August 6, 2019

**Subject: Conciliation/sanctions bill (A.2455-a/S.3840)
Treating physician bill (A.4236/S.4641)**

Dear Governor Cuomo:

We are writing to urge you to sign the sanctions and conciliation bill, A.2455-a/S.3840-a, and the treating physician bill, A.4236/S.4641). Both of these bills will enhance the effectiveness of the public assistance work rules; one will bring to the entire state a fair, constructive process for engaging recipients in work activities, and the other will greatly improve the accuracy of employability determinations.

In 2015, a new state law dramatically improved the process by which recipients can respond to an allegation of non-compliance with the welfare work rules. The law replaced a punishment-based process with one that emphasizes recipient re-engagement in work and training programs. But the bill was modified to apply only to New York City. **REACH Advocacy strongly supports A.2455-a/S.3840-a, which would broaden the law to apply statewide.**

Outside of New York City, an alleged failure to comply with a work rule triggers a sanction process that, in effect, puts the burden on the individual to demonstrate good cause for not complying. This may pose an insurmountable barrier for individuals who are rarely represented, who have physical or mental health limitations, limited education and/or limited English proficiency.

For the past four years REACH Advocacy has operated a low barrier winter emergency shelter and we have had many guests who have been sanctioned in a punitive measure and our social work team has worked with them to enable them to be housed safely. As an organization we believe that these bills will encourage a more humane approach that will encourage people to become more self-sufficient.

Sanctions sharply reduce an already inadequate public assistance grant, and inevitably cause severe hardship, hunger, eviction, loss of utilities and the need for expensive emergency services.

A.2455-a/S.3840-a would protect against inappropriate sanctions by requiring that:

- Districts determine whether an alleged failure to comply was related to a disability, a child care problem or transportation difficulties.
- The individual can avoid or end a sanction by complying with work requirements.
- There can be no sanction for a single infraction, such as one missed appointment.

These are fair, reasonable and constructive measures. They protect individuals who may be unable to comply with a work requirement, or who have a single lapse in a rigid, sometimes unforgiving system. The bill will afford **all** public assistance recipients in New York the opportunity to participate in beneficial activities and limit the risk of unwarranted punishment.

The “treating physician” bill will improve the process by which welfare recipients are determined capable of fulfilling work requirements. When recipients are evaluated for employability, they are advised to bring in evidence from their treating health practitioners and are often also evaluated by medical staff at the local Department of Social Services or under contract with DSS. The current law leaves local DSS with nearly unfettered discretion as to the weight given to the agency evaluators as compared to the recipients’ treating practitioners.

This bill would direct that if the treating practitioner’s diagnosis differs from that of the agency evaluators, the opinion of the treating practitioner will be controlling. But this rule is subject to certain common-sense criteria, such as the length of time the individual has been seeing the treating practitioner, the practitioner’s specialties, and the consistency of the practitioner’s view with the general weight of the evidence. This rule would serve to sharply reduce the likelihood of arbitrary employability decisions by DSS, decisions that might result in inappropriate, even health endangering assignments for recipients with disabilities and work limitations.

Both the sanctions bill and the treating physician bill will bring greater fairness and effectiveness to the public assistance work programs. We urge you to sign them both.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Sarah M. Peters, Secretary for the Board

We continue to look for ways to collaborate with others in speaking up about the housing crisis we face for those who have very limited financial resources.

I am pleased that soon we will welcome a new Board member who has significant experience in the realm of advocacy and who will join this committee. Others are welcome.



Peter W. Peters, Chair.