



NEW YORK STATE SENATOR

Robert G. Ortt

Ortt Seeks Mental Health, Disability Answers

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Senator asks for transition plans during budget hearings

State Senator Rob Ortt (R,C,I-North Tonawanda) today sought clarification from agencies overseeing mental health, developmental disability services, and substance abuse in New York State. As chairman of the Senate's Mental Health and Developmental and Disabilities Committee, Ortt led a joint legislative budget hearing focusing on the programmatic and financial impact of the Governor's proposed budget.

The hearing included testimony from executive agencies and community advocates. He began by addressing the state's closure plans, specifically plans to close West Seneca Children's Psychiatric Center and transfer the patients to Buffalo Psychiatric Hospital.

"I have some serious reservations about some of the activities taken by the Department of Mental Health," he said. "I don't believe the state should be planning to shut down a children's facility in West Seneca and transfer those children to Buffalo Psychiatric alongside mentally ill adults. I feel this concern is entirely justified when we consider the state's failure to follow notification laws when it reduced services at Creedmoor (Psychiatric Center) and the New York City Children's Hospital."

Ortt later joined families and supporters of those affected by disabilities in expressing concern with the current transition in the system.

"The state has a distinct and critical role to play here in terms of not only funding, but with transparency and communication," Ortt said. "It's heartbreaking to hear some of these stories. We have aging parents who are simply wondering what will happen to their special needs children when they're gone, or when they're physically or mentally unable to care for them. I've heard from courageous workers with disabilities who wonder what will happen when sheltered workshops – their means of employment – are closed. In both of these vital areas, the state has not provided answers."

Following testimony from Office of Mental Health Commissioner Ann Marie Sullivan, Ortt asked for clarification on voluntary mental health training for law enforcement agencies, plans to shift patient medication decisions away from doctors and patients (prescriber prevails), and bed closures across the state.

“I believe we have a long way to ensure that in the massive system-wide changes taking place in the mental health system, we don’t fall behind in any areas.” said Ortt. “My focus will be demanding a clear plan for serving patients and families dealing with mental illness across the spectrum from education, to housing, to service.”

Also speaking was Arlene Gonzalez-Sanchez, Commissioner of Office of Substance Alcoholism and Substance Abuse Services. Ortt, a co-chair of the Senate Task Force on Heroine and Opioid Abuse, followed her testimony with a discussion about the need to expand prevention and treatment services for the state’s growing heroine problem.

In the coming weeks, Ortt said the Senate will pass its own budget. The State Senate and State Assembly will also hold joint committee meetings as they, along with the Governor, negotiate the final elements of the State Budget. The budget is due March 31.