



NEW YORK STATE SENATOR

Robert G. Ortt

# Senator Ortt Leads Mental Health, Disability Hearing

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February 6, 2017

ISSUE:

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ALBANY – State Senator Rob Ortt (R,C,I – North Tonawanda), chairman of the Senate’s Mental Health and Developmental Disabilities Committee, today led a Joint Legislative Budget Hearing probing state agencies on the systematic and financial impact of the Governor’s proposed budget. Clarification was sought on the impact this year’s state budget will have on services across the state dealing with mental health, developmental disability services, and substance abuse.

The hearing opened with testimony from Office of Mental Health (OMH) Commissioner Ann Sullivan. Senator Ortt questioned plans to close the Western New York Children’s Psychiatric Center (WNYCPC) in West Seneca and transfer adolescent patients to the Buffalo Psychiatric Center. The Governor’s plans include spending more than \$12 million to update the Buffalo Psychiatric Center.

“Despite years of bi-partisan objections from the WNY Delegation and outcry from families served by the WNY Children’s center, the governor and OMH are moving ahead with the merger,” **said Senator Ortt.** “However, there is no clinical reason to move vulnerable, young victims who have been inflicted with severe trauma to an institutional setting with adults – some of whom are violent. At a time when the Governor is pushing to raise the age of criminal liability for felons, it sends the wrong signal that the state would accept a scenario where children in need of mental health support would be co-located with adults. The sole focus of decisions like this must always be the welfare of our children.”

The hearing then included testimony from New York State Office for People with Developmental Disabilities (OPWDD) Acting Executive Deputy Commissioner Helene DeSanto. Ortt joined other members of the Senate to push for adequate wage increases for direct support professionals. Senator Ortt has been working with the #Fair2DirectCare coalition to urge the Governor to include \$45 million in this year's state budget to cover salary increases for nonprofit direct care providers over the next several years.

**Senator Ortt said,** "I'm proud to stand shoulder to shoulder with direct care professionals, individuals in the disability community, and nonprofit agencies who care for our most vulnerable population across the state. These employees deserve a fair living wage, and I will continue to fight for that throughout the budget process. This goes beyond the state's fiscal obligation to these providers – it's a moral imperative to help those most in need and we cannot leave them behind."

Another key speaker was Arlene Gonzalez-Sanchez, Commissioner of Office of Alcoholism and Substance Abuse Services. Commissioner Gonzalez-Sanchez discussed the law that recently went into effect to address the scourge of heroin in communities statewide. She said the Governor committed a total of \$200 million in the 2016-17 state budget for heroin and opioid crisis, treatment, outpatient, and residential services. Senator Ortt, who co-chaired the Senate's Joint Task Force on Heroin and Opioid Addiction, sought clarification on what new programs are being offered to help addicts, and the cause for delay in getting new treatment beds up and running.

"Last year, Senate Republicans fought to include historic funding in the state budget to address this public health crisis with the sense of urgency it deserved," **said Senator Ortt.** "Seven months later, the Executive has yet to reveal where that funding has gone and how much of it is included in this year's \$200 million budget request. The dangers of heroin and opioid abuse continue to spread to communities across our entire state, tearing families apart. I'd like to look beyond the grand announcements, beyond the smoke and mirrors, and get to the root of what we're doing to respond effectively and efficiently in order to curb the growing drug epidemic."

In the coming weeks, the state Senate will present and pass its own budget. The Senate and 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.