

# Group calls on candidates to focus on state's children

## OMH report on early intervention expected soon

By CHRIS MUELLER  
Gazette staff writer

The New York Children's Action Network last Tuesday called on candidates to run on a platform that will put an emphasis on children.

The advocacy group held a rally on the steps of the Capitol to urge candidates to focus on early intervention and early development programs for New York children. The organizers said this is a key issue when deciding who to vote for.

"Our children don't get to vote on Election Day, but we do," said Karen Schimke, president of the Schulyer Center for Analysis and Advocacy and founder of New York Children's Action Network.

The advocates are asking those running on Nov. 4 to include in their platforms issues such as universal health care, mental health treatment for youths, child welfare and pre-kindergarten.

Meanwhile, the group is awaiting a final version of the Children's Mental Health Plan which is scheduled to be released by the state Office of Mental Health next month.

OMH will be releasing the final version of their Children's Mental Health Plan to Gov. David A. Paterson on Oct. 1. The plan gives recommendations on how to create programs that will give children early access to necessary treatment.



Gazette photo by Andrew Lipkowitz  
Karen Schimke, of NY CAN, urges candidates running in the general election, both at the statewide and local levels, to focus on child-related issues. The group held a rally at the Capitol last week.

"The recommendations are a number of suggestions and joint initiatives that better serve children across the state," said David Woodlock, the division director of the Office of Mental Health's Division of Children and Family Services. "They focus on early intervention and better inner agency collaboration and cooperation."

Woodlock said early intervention would give children the chance to have a mental disorder addressed before it becomes more debilitating.

"If you intervene early, you don't have secondary problems like school failure," he said.

The Children's Mental Health plan began with the passing of the Children's Mental Health Act of 2006. The act states that the Office of Mental Health

must create a plan by Oct. 1 that provides "culturally and linguistically competent comprehensive, coordinated mental health assessments, early intervention and treatment services for children from birth until age 18."

After the initial drafting of the recommendations, the Office of Mental Health held five public hearings across the state, Woodlock said. He said more than 1,000 people showed up to comment about them. The recommendations include:

- Strengthening accountability mechanisms.
- Creating infrastructures and funding to support family and youth involvement in support services.
- Investing in prevention, early identification and intervention for

children at risk of social, emotional, behavioral or academic challenges.

After submission, the governor's Children's Cabinet, created by former Gov. Eliot Spitzer in June 2007, will look at the recommendations, said Kristin Proud, the deputy director of state operations for the governor's office.

Proud said the goal of the Children's Cabinet is to "bring together state agencies to make sure children have access to all the help they need."

"What gets taken from plan to action, we're not there yet," Woodlock said. "The time to ask the hard questions will happen after Oct. 1, but I'm hopeful."

On Sept. 1, New York began its expanded New York Health Plus program so more children could receive health care. Schimke said this is a step in the right direction but it's not enough.

The Children's Action Network cites a study done by the Schulyer Center, called "Growing Up in New York." According to the study, students that are classified as emotionally disturbed are less likely to graduate than students with mental or developmental disabilities. The study indicates that 56 percent of emotionally disturbed students drop out, while 26 percent of students with mental or developmental disabilities drop out.

The study also points out that for over the past 20 years, suicide has been the leading cause of death among 15- to 19-year-old New Yorkers.

"It's time for our leaders to step up," said Christina Felix who is a member of Youth Power!, Families Together in New York State. "I am living proof we can recover and succeed."

## Faith leaders plea with gov. to raise welfare grants

By CHRIS MUELLER  
Gazette staff writer

Religious leaders, in a letter sent to Gov. David A. Paterson, joined the Hunger Action Network in their mission to raise the basic welfare grant and provide universal health care in New York.

The letter, which was sent to Paterson Sept. 15, calls for a raise in the basic welfare grant, from \$291 to \$475 for a family of three.

While Hunger Action, an advocacy group for the poor and homeless, focuses more on policy analysis analysis, the faith leaders are trying to appeal to the governor on moral grounds, said Mark Dunlea, the executive director of Hunger

Action Network.

"As faith communities, we are trying to bring awareness to the governor from a religious perspective," said the Rev. Debra Jameson, director of Focus Churches of Albany, a non-profit Christian faith group. "The welfare grant is so substandard and way below what a person can live on. We are punishing the poor by not giving them enough cash assistance to maintain their daily subsistence."

The basic welfare grant has not been raised in 18 years and is now less than 50 percent of the federal poverty level, according to Hunger Action Network. A recent survey completed by the group shows the cost of household items, like

milk and toothpaste, have increased by 284 percent over the last 18 years.

"We need your moral leadership today more than ever," wrote the faith leaders. "Every week in our congregations we see a terrible loss of hope among those who depend on the state for the basic necessities of life."

The group of religious leaders represents several faiths including Judaism, Christianity and Islam, Jameson said.

"Whatever the faith tradition is, we are all in agreement that this [welfare grant] is substandard," she continued.

Jameson said the group has not heard any feed-back from the governor's office, and is attempting to have a sit-down with Paterson.

## Task force will examine NY's juvenile justice system

By CAITLIN PURCELL  
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It has been almost two years since Darryl Thompson, former resident of Tryon Boys Residential Center, died of cardiac arrhythmia after two aides physically restrained him.

The altercation, which was widely reported on, occurred after Thompson pushed a staff member while incarcerated at the juvenile institution, and the staff member and a colleague pinned Thompson to the ground, face down, in order to handcuff him.

Minutes later, the 15-year-old boy, who suffered from heart abnormalities, stopped breathing and was later pronounced dead at a nearby hospital. Following Thompson's death in November 2006, the Justice Department began an investigation of Tryon Residential Center in Fulton County.

Since then, Gladys Carrión, the commissioner of New York's Office of Child and Family Services, said she has been working to transform the juvenile justice system. Carrión took office in



Carrión

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