

# Long Island Business NEWS

Where Business Gets Down to Business

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## A roof, a meal and a little 'Concern'

By Ken Cerini

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Suffolk County once housed over 30,000 patients in what was once one of the nation's largest psychiatric hospitals. Today, less than 700 people are hospitalized at Pilgrim Psychiatric Center, the only remaining state psychiatric hospital on Long Island.

So what happened to the rest of the patients who once called Pilgrim State and other large psychiatric facilities home?

Concern for Independent Living helps the mentally ill by providing safe, affordable housing and varying levels of support. "The advent of effective medications along with better services has enabled people to recover from their illnesses in the community," said CIL Executive Director Ralph Fasano. "We have developed over 20 different projects and have never failed to bring a project to completion, putting a sizeable dent in the demand for this type of housing."

**Give a brief background of the organization.** Concern for Independent Living was founded in 1972 as Concerned Friends and Parents of Central Islip State Hospital, a group that advocated for the patients in this former state hospital. Today, our housing ranges from Supervised Community Residences, where staff are available 24 hours per day, seven days a week, to independent housing in the community. Staff provides services to individuals based on their individual needs and goals. [CIL] manages over 160 different sites in Suffolk County and is the largest provider of this type of housing on Long Island. [CIL] also houses approximately 40 families in houses and apartments throughout Suffolk County. Most of the families were homeless prior to entering our housing; within these families there are over 100 children who also receive services.

**You recently purchased three large facilities. What are the benefits and challenges compared to your community-based facilities?** In 2004, three large adult homes announced they were closing their doors and all of the people would need to be referred elsewhere. In all three of the homes, the vast majority of the residents had a psychiatric disability. While this created a crisis in mental health housing, it also created an opportunity. We raised over \$45 million to purchase and renovate the sites – located in West Sayville, Riverhead and East Patchogue – and are in the process of renovating all three into high quality housing.

By providing people with their own studio apartments in a building that has staff 24 hours per day, we are able to give people privacy but also provide on-site supports for the people that need them. Our experience has shown that some people need on-site services during different stages of their recovery. Each building will have a library, computer room, gym, lounges and patios. Dinner will be served every day in the community dining room. Residents will receive vocational rehabilitation services aimed at helping them attain competitive employment.

**How has the community embraced these projects?** The West Sayville community has openly embraced us and can serve as a model for how communities should respond to new programs in their area. From the start, the community and local leaders were involved in asking questions about the housing and making suggestions on how we should proceed. The Islip Town Board not only voted unanimously for the project to proceed, but changed their meeting schedule so that we could meet a funding deadline. The West Sayville Civic Association was wonderful in welcoming us and offered to participate in our opening early next year. This site, Pollack Gardens, is named after the family of Davis and Helen Pollack, two of Concern's board members, for their outstanding advocacy for people with psychiatric disabilities. Dr. Pollack has been the president of Concern for 12 years.

In Riverhead, we were met with initial opposition, including some bad press that did not accurately reflect what we were doing. The former adult home had a negative reputation in this community and people initially assumed we would be no different. When we explained that we were investing approximately \$10 million in restoring the building and that we would have less than half of the amount of people that previously lived there with more supervision, there was more acceptance. The Town Board eventually voted unanimously to approve the project.

We are still in the process of proposing our plan for our Brookhaven site.

**What does this do for the overall need on Long Island?** These three projects will help us house an additional 150 individuals, bringing the total number of individuals and families that we serve to over 530. There are currently over 600 people on waiting lists for mental health housing in Suffolk County, in addition to the hundreds of people in shelters. Suffolk spends approximately \$40 million per year sheltering homeless people. The housing that we provide represents a cost-effective way of removing people from shelters and preventing homelessness. It represents a permanent solution.

**What's the next step for Concern?** Our current focus will be to do the best job we can to develop these three sites into housing that we can all be proud of. We are part of a statewide Campaign for Mental Health Housing that is calling for the new administration in Albany to plan the development of 35,000 units of mental health housing across the state. We believe the housing we are developing can serve as one model amongst an array of models which can be used to meet the high level of demand for housing.

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Founded: 1972

Staff: 75

Annual budget: \$8 Million

Fundraised budget: \$80,000

Program services: 91 percent

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