

Candidates grilled on mental health priorities

By Helen Niemiec
staff writer

The Oakland County Mental Health Coalition extracted a number of campaign promises for increased funding and setting mental health as a higher priority from local state and county candidates.

The coalition held a forum Monday at the Bloomfield Township Library, asking candidates questions dealing solely with programs for the mentally ill and developmentally disabled.

The only glitch of the evening was a 15-minute pause between candidate groups. John Engler, Republican candidate for governor, did not want to speak since Gov. James Blanchard was not there. Instead, Blanchard sent Tom Watkins, director of the state's mental health department.

Agnes Winner, executive director of Association of Retarded Citizens/Oakland County, shrugged off the offer. "I guess I should have let him know but I didn't think about it," Winner said.

Engler was appearing at the Hyatt Regency-Debornon that evening, while Blanchard was in Lansing. "I'm sorry the governor couldn't make it and send his staff instead. I care about the issues," Engler told the group.

CARE FOR the mentally ill and developmentally disabled is constitutionally required, Engler said. His goals would be to reduce the disparity in funding for the programs by county and to encourage mainstreaming rather than institutionalization of the disabled.

Watkins said Blanchard had a history of being supportive of the mentally disabled, as evidenced by annual increases in the budget.

"It's not enough but it's a commitment," Watkins said. "Do we need to do more? Absolutely. But we fear that Engler will hurt the developmentally disabled because of the level of property tax cuts that he is recommending."

Michigan Senate candidates agreed that increasing the mental health budget is a question of priority.

Jack Faxon, D-15th District, has visited the Clinton Valley facility and found it "woefully inadequate." The facility needs either to be modified or rebuilt.

"We have to revisit what we are doing for the mentally ill," Faxon said. "We need to redirect our energies to programs in smaller settings, that are more adequately supervised rather than institutional settings."

Faxon opposes cutting the mental health budget and said more must be done to reduce the current waiting

time of approximately seven years to be placed in group homes.

DENISE ALEXANDER, the Republican challenging Faxon, favors mainstreaming the disabled in school.

"Studies have shown that the best way to help the disabled is to provide classrooms with their peers. There is a greater acceptance now of the developmentally disabled and they do respond well to them," she encouraged, Alexander said.

She added that keeping disabled children in a regular classroom also will provide budget reductions, since extra classrooms, teachers and furnishings will not be needed.

"Mental wellness" programs, she added, shouldn't be included in the Mental Health Department budget.

"We need more respite care, especially for those who are caring for children at their home," Alexander said.

Respite care is much like a day-care facility, offering day and evening services for families who must be away from their offspring for a short period of time, usually only a few days.

Doug Cruce, R-16th District, said the mental health budget statewide hasn't been decreased but he is concerned that Oakland County is not getting its fair share.

"OAKLAND COUNTY is receiving less," Cruce said. "The money for local services has been reduced."

Part of the problem, he said, is that the courts and U.S. Congress have been mandating certain programs be carried out by all health departments. He did not list required services.

"What they're mandating may not be considered a high priority here. It should be left up to us where we spend the dollars," Cruce said.

John Freeman, Democratic challenger, did not attend.

Dave Honigman, 17th Senate District Republican candidate, favors providing a "lifetime continuum of services" for the disabled, who now are only provided with educational assistance until they are 26 years old. He personally is aware of the problem because a neighbor has a 25-year-old son and "all of a sudden, there is no support when this child turns 26."

Education and other opportunities should be made available to the mentally ill and developmentally disabled because failure to provide those services "is a terrible tragedy," Honigman said.

The mental health budget also should be reviewed, Honigman said. More money should be directed to programs that help the mentally ill and developmentally disabled,

rather than some wellness programs offered. He pointed to the state providing an 800 number for smokers who wish to quit.

"HELP FOR the mentally ill should be a priority over that," Honigman said.

William Foley, Democratic candidate for the 17th District Senate, did not attend.

Michael Bouchard, Republican candidate for 65th District state representative, said he would endorse any measures that would encourage mainstreaming the disabled, rather than institutionalizing them.

He also criticized the Clinton Valley facility for its lack of humanity. "What goes on in Clinton Valley is a crime in itself," Bouchard said. He said that legislators rely on groups, such as the coalition, to help them become educated on social issues, including the plight of the mentally ill and disabled.

Cheryl Sugerman, Democratic candidate for the 65th District seat, did not attend.

Jan Dolan, R-69th District, said that more attention must be given to parents and other relatives raising the disabled in their homes. As it stands, she said, those in institutions

receive a priority in state services over those living with family.

"It's unfortunate but the state has a priority to de-institutionalize so less attention is paid to those living at home. As parents get older, they need help. There are more funds needed in this area," she said.

Dolan urged mental health advocates to lobby their legislators this year because with a tightening state budget, cuts will have to be made.

"MENTAL HEALTH is competing against DSS (Department of Social Services), higher education and corrections," Dolan said.

Barry Brickner, the Democratic candidate in the 69th District, did not attend.

County commission candidates present included: Teresa Krause (D) and incumbent Mark Chester, R-10th District; Charles Palmer, R-12th District; incumbent John Pappageorge, R-13th District; and incumbent Marilyn Gosling, R, and Tommy Thomson, D-14th District; incumbent Lawrence Pernick, D-20th District; and Carolyn Peyser, D-22nd District.

Help for family relationships

Oakland County Youth Assistance is sponsoring a workshop on Developing Healthy Family Relationships from 8:30 a.m. to noon Friday, Oct. 26, at the Waterford Community Center, 1415 Crescent Lake Road, Waterford, Mich.

essor, department of Family and Child Ecology at Michigan State University, is the speaker, sponsored by youth assistance's Family Education Committee.

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