Testimony to Nursing Home Safety Task Force
10/20/09
Jennifer Walling, Office of State Senator Heather Steans

I am speaking today on behalf of State Senator Heather Steans, of the 7th State Senate District. There are many reasons why this issue is important to our district and our constituents. The 7th state senate district covers the northern most lakefront part of Chicago, including Uptown, Edgewater and Rogers Park and is one of the geographically smallest senate districts in Illinois. Yet our residents include 15% of all mentally ill nursing home patients in the state of Illinois and 43% of all mentally ill nursing home patients in Chicago.

This past summer, I sent several interns from our office to read survey reports and visit all of the nursing homes with mental health patients in our district. At most facilities, the interns observed filthy, disgusting conditions, often in nursing home facilities that had just two months before been inspected and fined by the Illinois Department of Public Health. The survey reports at most facilities were full of incidents of medical neglect including an almost universal lack of comprehensive care programs for those with mental illness.

In addition, these facilities are a huge drain on resources in our community. One facility in the district generated over 6500 police calls in 20 months. This means the police are getting nearly twenty calls a day from this single facility. In the 48th ward alone, the police got nearly twenty thousand phone calls from nursing homes in a twenty month period.

The stories from our district about the public safety effects of these facilities are numerous. For example, in May of 2008, a woman was found dead in a motel room on Foster Avenue. This woman, Maratta Walker, was prostituting herself. She was a patient at the Somerset and suffered from seizures and was diagnosed with schizophrenia and bipolar disorder. She was not supposed to leave the facility without supervision. The Somerset knew that she was prostituting herself and she had tested positive for cocaine on multiple occasions. Maratta had been missing from the Somerset for two weeks before her body was found. The Somerset did not report her missing, but instead, continued to collect state money for her care.

The state pays nearly $120 million to facilities in the 7th district through Medicaid to care for mental health patients. Our most important reform to nursing homes would be to create a system where the funding for mental health follows a patient and meets the patient's needs. Through community care and increased outpatient services, more of these patients could be living independently and our state dollars would be used far more efficiently.

One of our constituent cases in the district office clearly demonstrated the need for these changes to the system. This constituent was a patient at a nursing home in our district. He came into our office for a year, first because all of his clothing was stolen and then, because conditions were so bad that he wanted to be discharged. He started to do things that would help him get discharged. He found a job at a grocery store. He found an apartment with low rent in the neighborhood that would take him. He bought a cell phone. But the facility still wouldn't discharge him and had no plans to do so. After our office reported the problem to public health and surveyors went to correct some of the issues there, the constituent was told he still could not be discharged and was given the choice to either stay or go to another facility with similar problems run by the same owners.

I know from survey reports that this constituent's facility was often cited for not providing comprehensive care plans to its patients. And this constituent told me about only rarely meeting with a caseworker. With appropriate services, people like this constituent could be living more independently with services that cost the state less. Moving to a community care system and tying funds to a patient instead of to a nursing home bed will go a long way towards providing care to our state's vulnerable mental health system and help people.