

NASW-NYS Political Post

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New York's Junior Senator Sworn In... Kirsten Gillibrand was sworn in as New York's junior Senator on Tuesday by Vice President Joseph Biden and so far, it appears many New Yorkers are comfortable with Governor David Patterson's pick. A recent Siena poll denotes "Fifty-one percent of voters approve of Gillibrand's appointment, including nine percent who strongly approve, compared to 28 percent who disapprove, seven percent strongly." Later in the week, now Senator Gillibrand garnered the endorsement of Emily's List, a political action committee that supports female pro-choice candidates. In announcing the endorsement, Emily's List President, Ellen Malcolm referred to Gillibrand as "a great advocate for women and families." But of course, you can only please some of the people some of the time as evidenced by the skewering analysis of the Governor's pick by MSNBC commentator and Caroline Kennedy friend Lawrence O'Donnell: "Paterson has appointed Kirsten Gillibrand, a second-term congresswoman from Hudson, near Albany. Paterson has no comprehension of upstate New York, absolutely none, and has chosen someone better at representing cows than people." Lawrence O'Donnell said: "What you have is the daughter of a lobbyist, instead of the daughter of a former president or the son of a former governor. This is the hack world producing the hack result that the hacks are happy with." Ouch! FYI...NASW endorsed Gillibrand for each of her congressional races and as such has met with her several times.

Commissioners Testify in NY State Mental Hygiene Budget Hearings... Yesterday, Commissioners Michael Hogan (OMH), Diana Jones-Ritter (OMRDD), and Karen Carpenter-Palumbo (OASAS) testified before a joint Senate-Assembly panel of the Finance and Ways & Means committees. The subject of the hearing was the Mental Hygiene portion of the 2009-2010 Executive Budget. While defending agency cuts and reimbursement restructuring, the commissioners faced many questions from legislators with longstanding passions for mental health and substance abuse policy. Of note, Assemblyman Peter Rivera, chair of the Assembly Mental Health Committee questioned Commissioner Hogan on the absence of veterans' mental health funding, particularly for PTSD. Hogan noted OMH's developing collaboration with the Division of Veterans Affairs and the Office of Military and Naval Affairs and stated that "the right approach and attitude in the clinics receiving returning soldiers" is critical, and that they should "not have to be waiting in line" for services. Hogan also spoke to cultural competence in his exchanges with Mr. Rivera: "You can't get good outcomes if the [provider] is not culturally competent." Concepts such as "the right clinical approach" and "cultural competence" are key elements of the NASW-NYS Veterans Mental Health Initiative; and we hold our policymakers to their word of commitment to developing such appropriate services.

Another hot topic during the hearings was the SHU bill, which was actually signed last year by then Governor Spitzer, but is delayed in 2009-2010 budget language, putting it off for two more years. The SHU bill provides for assessment and treatment of prisoners with serious mental illness and the diversion of such prisoners from special housing units (SHUs), which have drastically deleterious mental health effects. Many advocate testimonies throughout the hearing decried the delay of the SHU

bill, while the new chair of the Senate Mental Health and Developmental Disabilities Committee, Shirley Huntley also grilled the OMH commissioner on the delay of this important piece of legislation.

Stimulus Package Clears the House...In a vote strictly down party lines the House voted yesterday 244-188 in favor of an 819 billion dollar stimulus package supported by our new Commander in Chief, Barack Obama. Though the measure is subject to some additional tweaking by conference committee once it moves through the Senate, in its current form New York is slated to receive at least \$10 billion in Medicaid funding in the next two years (direct aid said to begin as early as March / April), and almost \$5 billion for schools and transportation projects. Senator Chuck Schumer noted that "\$737 million in Medicaid relief will go directly to upstate counties, as will at least \$860 million in education." "It's not a panacea," Schumer said, stressing that it won't keep local officials from having to make spending cuts. But it keeps officials upstate from having to immediately choose between major property tax increases and program cuts for two years, while giving the city "a shot in the arm." Worthy of note though is the fact that, in an attempt to garner Republican support, House Democrats agreed to carve out an initiative allowing for family planning funds for low-income groups from the package, a move that has angered many!