

# DAAILYNEWS

NEW YORK'S HOMETOWN NEWSPAPER

## Still mentally ill, and still dangerous

BE OUR GUEST

BY D. J. JAFFE

courts, prisons and jails and im-

proves the quality of life for every-

one. As the authors noted, "Both

the general public and people as-

signed to [Kendra's Law] benefit

in crime and violence and the lat-

ter through a reduction in expert-

enced coercion and all of its unto-

ward consequences."

Unfortunately, Kendra's Law

has serious loopholes that pre-

vent people who could benefit

from it from being included. A bill

sponsored by Assemblywoman

Alien Gunther (D-Sullivan

County) and state Sen. Catharine

Young, a western New York Re-

publican, would close them. It

would.

■ Fix a crack in the system that al-

lows mentally ill people to be re-

leased from prisons and jails with-

out first determining if they

should be court-ordered to stay in

treatment and on the medications

that can prevent them from be-

coming violent

again.

■ Fix a crack in the

system that allows

people who were in-

voluntarily hospital-

ized because they

were a "danger to

themselves or oth-

ers" to be released

without determin-

ing whether they need court-or-

dered treatment in the commu-

nity to prevent them from deterio-

rating.

■ Fix a crack in the system that al-

lows court orders to expire with-

out a review of whether they

should be renewed. Of the 9,393

individuals courts have ordered

to accept treatment so far, only

1,928 currently have active or-

ders. That means 7,465 people are

no longer required to stay in treat-

ment. Talk about playing with

fire.

Albany ought not wait until

there is another horrific head-

line-grabbing violence victim

who winds up giving his or her

name to yet another law. Acting

now would be far more humane

for people with mental illness and

far safer for the public at large.

Jaffe is an advocate for people

with serious mental illness and

founder of mentalillnesspolicy.org.

It's virtually impossible to get

the public to focus on the

chronic problem of serious

mental illness absent an act of

violence by someone who suf-

fers from it. That's unfortunate,

because everyone in the city is

aware of people — like the appar-

ently mentally ill man who recent-

ly ran through the subway nude —

who didn't get the treatment they

needed, who should have re-

ceived medicine, but got hand-

cuffed instead.

A bill pending in Albany to im-

prove Kendra's Law could help

people with serious mental illness

— and, in the process, prevent the

next "psychotic killer goes on

rampage" headline. But there's

been precious little movement on

the bill in Albany.

Those content with the current

law are playing with fire.

Kendra's Law, which is what's

on the books right now, took ef-

fect in 1999 after a young man

with schizophrenia and a history

of violence who was not taking

his medications pushed Kendra

Webdale to her

death in front of an

oncoming subway

train. The law lets

courts order certain

people with serious

mental

illness

(those with a past

history of violence)

to stay on medica-

tions and continue

other treatments that prevent

them from becoming psychotic,

destitution or even violent again.

Equally important, courts can or-

der the community-based mental

health programs to start accept-

ing these individuals into their

programs. They can no longer

shun the most seriously ill.

The results have been outstand-

ing. Multiple studies show people

who are treated under Kendra's

Law — who were more violent to

begin with — experience dramatic

drops in homelessness, incarcera-

tion, suicide, violence and hospi-

talization. A study by Bruce Link

and others published in the Jour-

nal Psychiatric Services in May

2011 found that the odds of arrest

for a violent offense for mentally

ill individuals were reduced more

than eightfold after they were put

under court orders to accept treat-

ment. That saved massive

amounts of money for police,