

Women's health advocates have high hopes

By **KATRINA KIELTYKA**
Gazette staff writer

Frequent applause rose amid pink balloons in the Well of the Legislative Office Building Jan. 12, where more than 300 advocates for women's reproductive health gathered for the Family Planning Advocates of New York State's first "Women's Health Matters! Day of Action."

The event was as much a call to action on part of the FPA to the gathered advocates as it was a celebration; honored at the event were Sens. Andrea Stewart-Cousins, D-Yonkers, and Eric Schneiderman, D-Bronx, as well as Assemblywoman Naomi Rivera, D-Bronx, for their support and work in passing reproductive rights and health care legislation. The three lawmakers were presented with awards by the FPA.

The event began with a speech by Assembly Speaker Sheldon Silver, D-Manhattan, during which he congratulated the award-winning legislators for their "outstanding leadership." Silver also expressed thanks toward former FPA President JoAnn Smith and directed congratulations toward her successor, Tracey Brooks, sentiments that were echoed by many of the speakers throughout the event.

Also stressed by Silver was the importance of "collective participation" as he urged attendees to "make the most of your day of action."

Brooks, addressing the audience with a broad smile, referred to the "winds of change," saying they were now blowing in the direction of the FPA as the new Senate Democratic majority takes hold. "This is our time, I can feel it," she said to cheers from the audience. Citing the legislation the FPA hopes to see passed, she queried, "How can they disagree with this investment?"



Gazette photo by Edward J. Carr
Shelby Knox speaks about sex education at the Family Planning Advocates' first "Women's Health Matters! Day of Action."

According to an FPA press release, for every \$1 spent on family planning services in New York, \$4 is saved in Medicaid costs. The legislation that will save this money, the FPA says, are both the Healthy Teens Act, which would establish a competitive grant program to fund sex education, and the Reproductive Health and Privacy Protection Act, which would continue protecting a woman's right to have an abortion in New York should the federal government overturn *Roe v. Wade* and allow individual states to determine the legality of the procedure.

State Health Commissioner Richard Daines took the opportunity to speak on the health care reforms he hopes will pass during this legislative session, as well as pointing out that Gov. David A. Paterson, despite the state budget crisis, did not propose cutting funding for

family planning services in his Executive Budget, to which the audience responded enthusiastically.

State Comptroller Thomas DiNapoli spoke next and emphasized to advocates the building of relationships with legislators via office visits or phone calls. "Women's health matters because family health matters."

Next to speak was Senate Majority Leader Malcolm A. Smith, D-St. Albans, who took the podium to a standing ovation.

Smith said he is in the "right place at the right time" to pass reproductive rights legislation.

Pausing after asserting his position as Senate majority leader to appreciate what he called the "ring" of the title, Smith said, "I will use every resource available to continue the fight." He concluded with a promise of direct action: "I will

make passage of the Healthy Teens Act a priority," he said.

Following Smith, both Schneiderman and Rivera were presented with the Margaret Sanger award, which, according to the FPA, "recognizes the recipients' significant contributions to the advancement of voluntary family planning and to the concept that each child born should be wanted and loved."

Both legislators said they were honored, with Rivera saying she felt a special pride in being a mother and woman. "Women must not accept," she said, "they must challenge."

In accepting his award, Schneiderman said it was a "pleasure to finally be able to deliver on decades of promise of pro-choice legislation," adding that he has a "hard time understanding opposition to women exercising their rights."

Part of this opposition in respect to the Healthy Teens Act is the struggle to define what is meant by "age-appropriate sex education," Rivera said in an interview. "As soon as our kids are old enough to start asking questions about what our bodies look like, we have to educate them," she said.

Stewart-Cousins was the recipient of the Champion of Choice award, which "recognizes the recipient's contributions to expanding reproductive health care choices," according to the FPA.

Stewart-Cousins, saying she was honored from a personal standpoint having been an unwed teen mother, added that she didn't want her daughter's rights to be "undermined in any way" in the future and that with the passing of the legislation the FPA supports, "we will all be champions."

Speaking on behalf of Attorney General Andrew Cuomo, Mylan Denerstein, executive deputy attorney general for social

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Health care advocates keeping a close eye on Medicaid funding

By **VICTORIA STORY**
Gazette staff writer

Twelve health care providers and patient advocacy organizations united last Tuesday in Albany to discuss possible federal aid for Medicaid in New York.

The federal stimulus package, which is currently in the works, is expected to include about \$5 billion for state Medicaid funding. States are required to pay a portion of the bill for health care services covered under the federal Medicaid insurance program.

At a press conference conducted by the coalition of health care providers and advocates, all 10 people who spoke made it clear that they want to ensure any money the state gets from the federal government to cover Medicaid expenses must be used for that purpose.

It is the coalition's intent to put pressure on the New York Legislature so that if the congressional delegation is successful at getting the funding necessary to provide some relief to the state, that those funds are dedicated to Medicaid as intended, said Daniel Sisto, president of the Healthcare Association of New York State.

State Medicaid funding was cut by \$1 billion this fiscal year and stands to lose around \$1.3 billion more in 2009-2010, according to Sisto. Despite those cuts, Sisto did applaud Gov. David A. Paterson for wanting to expand state health programs such as Child Health Plus, Family Health Plus and for proposing to devote more state dollars for primary, preventative and community care.

He also cited the governor for fighting

for more Medicaid funding from the federal government.

The pressure is on the president to come up with a noncontroversial federal stimulus package, according to the coalition. "The one thing they don't need is a lot of states saying, 'let me spend the money the way they want.' We're going to ask and we have been asking the [congressional] delegation to include in the relief package language that says the states must maintain their efforts, maintain their spending, maintain eligibility or increase it," said Sisto.

He said the coalition is concerned about members of Congress who propose limiting the amount of Medicaid funding in the stimulus package and eliminating restrictions on how states spend the money they do get. "We believe if the money comes in for Medicaid then it should be used for Medicaid," he said.

The coalition has come together for one purpose, according to Sisto, to protect the patients and consumers who either need or are currently on the Medicaid program.

"I think it's critically important that we not separate the health care recovery from the economic recovery," said Richard Herrick, president and CEO of New York State Health Facilities Association. "We know that our congressional delegation is fighting hard for us. We are going to fight in New York to make sure those dollars that come back are Medicaid dollars and go directly into health care to maintain the safety net that our New Yorkers so desperately need."

The 12 health care providers and patient advocacy organizations are:



Gazette photo by Anand Balasar
Sue-Ellen Wagner, executive director of Healthcare Trustees of New York State, says that increased Medicaid funding should be used for Medicaid health services and nothing else.

Healthcare Association of New York State, Home Care Association of New York State, New York State Association of Health Care Providers Inc., Healthcare Trustees of New York State, New York Association of Homes and Services for the Aging, New York State Health

Facilities Association Inc., New York Organization of Nurse Executives, American Heart Association, Medical Society of the State of New York, American Cancer Society, Center for Medical Consumers and New York State Public Health Association.

Wine

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like the pharmacies, bakeries and hardware stores, you're going to see the last main street business go out the door again."

Steadily increasing unemployment has the potential to further swell if liquor stores go under in the future.

"How many jobs are being created by putting wine in grocery stores? That's my question," said Allen. "The answer is zero — when you're done stocking the Tide and the Cheer you're going to go stock the wine."

Still, supporters say that if passed, the

proposal would reap many economic benefits for the state.

"Allowing supermarkets and grocery stores to sell wine will create new markets for upstate and Long Island wineries and convenience for consumers," said Kenneth Adams, president and CEO of The Business Council of New York State in a prepared statement.

According to Ag and Markets, about one-third of grapes grown in New York are grown for wine. Last year, 500 tons of high-quality wine grapes were used for juice because the demand for wine was low. Since wine costs more than juice, the state and communities with wineries can expect to benefit greatly from an influx of

revenue, according to Chittenden.

This theory relies heavily on the assumption that if more wine is available there will be more consumption.

Ag and Markets estimates a potential increase of 20 percent in wine sales. Additionally, Paterson estimates that the state will be able to raise \$105 million by allowing grocery and convenience stores that currently sell beer to add wine in exchange for a franchise fee. The fee would equal 0.46 of 1 percent of the stores' total gross sales in the previous years.

"The franchise fee as proposed is too high in our opinion; it would price many convenience stores out of the

category," said Calvin. "Our stores are smaller; most would only be able to carry a limited inventory and selection of wine, and they would have a difficult time justifying the up-front investment for the return that they would get on a limited sales volume of wine."

And Calvin protested that including gasoline in the total sales to determine franchise fees would make the cost beyond the reach of most stores.

In another provision of the budget, Paterson proposed an increase on the excise tax on wine and beer to make it more in line with what surrounding states charge. The tax on wine would increase 32.1 cents per gallon under this proposal.

Workweek

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officials are among the list of essential workers that would not have their hours mandated, he said.

Gianaris said that many workers are open to considering his plan and pointed to the popularity of the shorter workweek in Utah.

In Utah, more than 65 percent of workers said that they prefer the four-day workweek schedule, according

to a November poll conducted by the Utah state Department of Human Resources Management. In addition, 76 percent said they feel there are several advantages to the compressed schedule, and more than 60 percent said there is sufficient flexibility to meet scheduling

needs. At the same time, just 35 percent said they believe that the compressed workweek has had a positive impact on their customers.

"It is exactly the type of idea we need to get out of the mess we are in," said Gianaris.

Schumer

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are praising Schumer for the proposal to secure federal funds for education. "Sen. Schumer is to be applauded for working to ensure that New York students are not the victims of this budget crisis, and for recognizing that schools can be part of the solution," said Richard C. Iannuzzi, president of NYSUT in a press release last Wednesday. "Additional federal funding for New York, in the form of block grants that would go directly to education, would enable us to avoid

devastating cuts to services for children and protect homeowners against large property tax increases."

The second area in need of funding is mass transportation. The Metropolitan Transportation Authority has a \$1.2 billion budget gap that needs to be closed, which is why the MTA approved service cuts and fare hikes in December, according to Schumer. The press release also said that Schumer and Rep. Jerrold Nadler, D-Manhattan, are pushing for \$20 billion to be included in the federal stimulus package, if included, the MTA could receive billions of dollars since, historically, New York has received one

out of every five dollars spent on mass transit by the federal government.

The third large area of spending for New York would be Medicaid. "The Legislature is still going to have to do a lot of work and the governor is pushing that, as he should, but it's going to alleviate some of the pain significantly," said Schumer, who hopes to secure up to \$5 million in Medicaid assistance for New York.

Paterson said he is hopeful the state would see 300,000 new jobs if the 1,922 proposed infrastructure projects get funded for \$11.7 billion. "This is not a handout this is a handback," he said. The infrastructure projects include

work on affordable housing, education modernization and energy projects.

Even with the federal stimulus package, Paterson cautions that it's not a solution to the big problem. "We have got to learn that our spending cannot exceed our revenues," said Paterson. "Even with the addition of resources from the federal government, it will all go to waste if we out spend it. So what we are going to have to do is change the culture of spending in the state."

The goal is to have the stimulus package on the president's desk by Feb. 13. Schumer said he would be surprised if it wasn't signed that day.

Rules

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lawmakers take the high moral ground without having to follow through, and one chamber acts boldly, confident that the other will balk and everything will stay comfortably — and dysfunctionally — the same?

The procedural Senate reforms this week respond to criticisms in the latest report from the Brennan Center, whose past recommendations both Smith and Valesky endorsed. The changes will:

Allow senators to vote to "discharge" bills from committees to the Senate floor after just 20 days, rather than the current 60 days.

Record the complete tallies on discharge motions, removing the cover for lawmakers who want to duck the votes.

Allow minority members to co-sponsor legislation without leadership approval.

If these changes sound technical and unremarkable, what's really remarkable is the rules that have prevented worthy bills from reaching the floor, and relegated minority lawmakers to second-class status.

Two major roadblocks to equal status

for senators are missing in the reform package: fair distribution of staff and resources for senators and equal allocation of "member item" grants. Smith says he will address these matters in coming weeks. He also wants a new, bipartisan panel to recommend more steps to open up Senate operations. "We're going to give the rank and file authority," he vows. "We're going to have a very bipartisan house."

Smith is right: There is more to be done. Some of that work must be done in the Legislature's other chamber. While Assembly Speaker Sheldon Silver's

people note they have reformed more than the Senate, both chambers still skew resources to favor majority lawmakers. Both confer too much power on their leaders rather than the committees where the people's business should be done openly. And both need to repair a flawed system for re-drawing legislative districts after the next census.

Valesky called this week's Senate reforms "a really positive first step and start to the process." It is certainly a start. But there is much, much further to go before there will be any real cause for celebration.

Smith

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there will be open bill sponsorship for any member that chooses to support a piece of legislation. In the past, minority party members could be excluded from signing onto majority sponsored bills.

"There has been a number of good bills proposed ... I've been here eight years now and there have been many bills that

I would have liked to be a sponsor of, but it wasn't allowed," Smith said.

Smith also wants to restore the ability to use "motion to discharge" to attempt to force a bill out of committee, permit full debate on motions to discharge and restore the practice of recording votes on discharge motions and non-sponsor amendments.

The new reform also calls for implementing the practice of dual reference of bills in cases where legislation is affected by more than one

committee. This change is expected to improve the committee process and allow committee members greater control over legislation coming to the floor.

The Senate will also be increasing the use of technology surrounding Senate sessions and decision-making. The Internet and other new media will be used to increase public awareness of, and access to, public policy debates and legislative records.

"The concerns facing New York today

are too important to allow a business-as-usual approach to impede the progressive agenda we intend to enact and the people deserve," Smith said. "The passage of these reforms is not the end of our effort, rather it is just the beginning of the reform era we hope to usher into Albany."

"This is just a first step," Smith said. "We need to go further and we will go further."

Art

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(Neuromuscular Techniques, pub. 2000) and James Cyriax, MD (Orthopedic Medicine pub 1944), and the list goes on. My point is that modern massage therapy is based on real science, real medicine, and real healers. It is a healing art.

The rude awakening for me is that our

New York State Governor, Paterson, wants to institute a sales tax on massage therapy as a "service industry" categorized with hair salons and credit rating services. As a New York State licensed massage therapist, it is a shock to me that I would have to collect sales tax and that other licensed medical practitioners would not.

Fellow practitioners understand the insult of this! Massage clients,

you choose massage therapy because these modalities accomplish what conventional drugs, chiropractic and physical therapy treatments do not address. Now that there is a budget crunch, your governor is proposing to penalize you for your free choice in seeking massage therapy instead of these other medical practices.

The governor's budget proposal can be stopped by enough voices — voices of

indignation to your Senate legislators. Have you ever written, called or visited your state legislators?

Remember, the concept of taxing healing at any level is immoral, be it the brain surgeon or your humble massage therapist. That is what your legislators need to hear, strong and often.

*Peter La Grasse, LMT
Stony Creek*

Hope

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justice, said the Office of the Attorney General "remains committed to standing for choice" and that they will be working to make sure the federal government does not "undermine" any laws surrounding emergency contraception distribution.

Citing the sometimes problematic nature of entering a women's health clinic that's being picketed, she said that they are always available to receive complaints, adding, "We're the people's lawyers, call us anytime."

Wrapping up the speeches was 22-year-old Shelby Knox, an activist who speaks nationwide on the importance of comprehensive sex education. Knox

spoke passionately about bringing stories from the "front lines," encouraging young women to "find their legs and make their mark" in the fight for improved women's health care and sex education.

In an interview, Knox said young women should look at their own stories as a starting point for activism. "Your own story is your most important weapon," she said, adding that elected

officials "have to trust honesty."

After the speeches, advocates dispersed to meet with legislators, where Brooks said they discussed continued funding for family planning. "We're the first big organization to come to the capital to lobby legislators," she noted, reflecting on the day's events, adding that the FPA is "very encouraged by the outstanding participation by statewide elected officials."