



**Joint Senate/Assembly Budget Hearing on Mental Hygiene Testimony of Sybil Newell
Executive Director of RISE Housing and Support Services
Thursday, February 16, 2023**

Thank you Senator Krueger, Assemblywoman Weinstein, and the chairs and members of the Senate and Assembly Fiscal and Mental Health committees for allowing me to come and speak to you today.

RISE Housing and Support Services, located in Saratoga Springs, exists to help people living with mental health, substance use, and other life challenges. Our mission is to help these people remain safe and healthy, and *in* the community through housing and supportive services. We've been doing this for almost fifty years with great success.

What we've come to know and experience during that time is that within our community, there exists a segment of people that, for various reasons, are simply unable to participate in daily activities typical of the general population. Due to psychiatric disabilities, addictions, trauma, or complex socioeconomic factors, these individuals find it impossible to hold a job, volunteer, attend school, or even participate in the more structured day programs that may be available. These individuals, whether they are housed or experiencing homelessness, often face stigma and isolation. Lacking social skills and disposable income, they are often unwelcome in the community spaces where people typically gather to meet friends and be part of the community. Trips to coffee shops, retail stores, restaurants, and even the public library, can be an intimidating undertaking that often leads to rejection.

This results in many of the people we serve either isolating in their homes or congregating at inappropriate public spaces that are not conducive to healthy positive activities. For those individuals that spend their time in self-imposed isolation, their overall health outcomes decline. When individuals choose to seek companionship in inappropriate public spaces, there grows an increase in behavioral outbursts, and a corresponding increase in costly emergency service calls.

Consequently, the public perception of the mental health, recovery, and homeless communities has devolved to one of intolerance and nonacceptance. As a result, police and EMS response costs have increased and business owners are desperate for a solution. Meanwhile, the mental and physical well-being of the people we serve has been deteriorating.

To address this need, RISE is developing *Homebase* – a low-barrier, psychosocial program that will provide a supportive and safe community for vulnerable citizens. The evidence-based model

we'll be using to operate the program, addresses a key Social Determinant of Health which is social connectedness. As we know, people's relationships and interactions with community members can have a major impact on their health and well-being.

The *Homebase* program will combat stigma and isolation, which has only been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, and will provide semi-structured therapeutic opportunities for people to develop skill sets and a natural support system to help create a path to recovery and success. In addition to reducing the use of more costly emergency services and enhancing public safety, other beneficial outcomes for our participants include a significant decrease in hospitalizations, reduced incarcerations and criminal-justice system involvement, improved mental and physical health, and improved overall well-being. These kinds of results are backed by statistics that demonstrate how providing opportunity and services to individuals in need, is far more effective than treatment or incarceration alone.

Expanding upon the traditional psychosocial program model, which historically has only been available to those diagnosed with a severe and persistent mental illness, *Homebase* will be available to *anyone* in Saratoga County who is experiencing a life challenge that prevents him or her from participating in a more structured educational, vocational, or social setting; this includes *anyone* who needs a "low-demand" setting where he or she can connect with others and learn life skills, without the pressure of immediately engaging in treatment or training. The individuals most in need of this program are precisely the ones who often have the most barriers to accessing care. This program will increase health equity and access by creating connections and removing real *or perceived* barriers to care.

As participation in structured programming is not required to access this program, those who lack the capacity, or simply choose not to engage in these offerings may simply utilize the facilities and socialize with other program members. But as program staff members build relationships with these individuals, they will encourage more program participation as appropriate. Additionally, program staff members will leverage these newly built relationships to engage eligible and interested members in accessing RISE's traditional residential and support services programming, as well as the array of other preventative services available to them in the community.

As you may or may not be aware, Saratoga Springs is experiencing a serious issue with homelessness. While many of the people who may utilize the *Homebase* program may be experiencing homelessness, we want to make it clear that this program is open to anyone experiencing mental health issues, substance use, or other life challenges.

Saratoga is not the only community that is experiencing a homelessness issue and RISE is not the only organization in need of a program like this. *Homebase* will serve as a model for neighboring communities to combat the stigma surrounding mental health, addictions, and homelessness by creating spaces that welcome all individuals in need of a place to belong—regardless of their diagnosis, addiction, or other life challenges.

Investing in low-barrier psychosocial programs up front will save the healthcare and law enforcement system money overall. We intend to work with the Bureau of Social Determinants

of Health to create an arrangement that demonstrates the value of *Homebase* and similar projects in the future. It will serve as a model for private and public health insurance support of programs addressing social determinants of health, as this proactive approach prevents higher-cost treatments from resulting health conditions.

We are asking the legislature to commit funding to support programs like *Homebase*. We're requesting help with operational costs in order to provide sufficient salaries for all program employees, including Peer Advocates with lived experience, transportation for participants, and further operational costs dedicated to facility operations.

The governor's commitment to mental health is evident and encouraging, but our current mental health system does not yet provide services adequate to meet the needs of the group of individuals I've described. *Homebase* will fill a conspicuous gap in the continuum of behavioral healthcare. We have to remember to provide services that address the whole person; to provide opportunities for individuals to make connections, create pathways to success, and develop strengths and skills- not to simply provide "treatment."

To provide a better picture of what *Homebase* will look like, I've provided some details of proposed operations.

Homebase will operate under expanded hours: Monday through Saturday from 8:00 am – 6:00pm. Hours of operation may be expanded to meet the community's needs as funding and staffing are available. Initial staff will include a Program Director, two Program Coordinators, two Peer Advocates, and a Custodian. The facilities will include a commercial kitchen, computer room, which is vital for teaching computer skills and explaining cyber security, a recovery library filled with literature related to substance-dependence recovery and mental hygiene, a workshop space where individuals may learn important skills related to money management, home management, and community awareness, and a living room to provide a central area for participants to relax and interact. *Homebase* will also provide a studio space which will be 2,000 square feet of dedicated space to be utilized for group art therapy and pre-vocational training. Art therapists will provide programming to participants and members of the wider community. Partnering employers will provide pre-vocational training sessions as requested.

Staff will track the following impact metrics, and measure progress at six-month intervals.

- Unduplicated *Homebase* members.
 - Sixty (60) unique individuals in the first program year.
- Police calls for service and arrests at downtown "hotspots".
 - Goal: 35% reduction after one-year of program implementation.
- Participation in RISE housing programs and/or support services.
 - Goal: 20% of *Homebase* members retained as RISE housing residents and/or support service recipients in the first year.
- Behavior And Symptom Identification Scale scoring – (A leading behavioral health assessment tool. The survey is scored using an algorithm that gives an overall score with five subscales for the following domains of psychiatric and substance abuse

symptoms and functioning: Relation to Self and Others, Depression and Anxiety, Daily Living and Role Functioning, Impulsive and Addictive Behavior, Psychosis.).

- Goal: 80% of *Homebase* members show improved scores after one-year of program implementation.
- Emergency service usage.
 - Goal: 35% reduction after one year of program implementation.
- Health insurance coverage.
 - Goal: 20% of *Homebase* members enrolled in a health insurance program after one-year of program implementation.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify here today on behalf of the most vulnerable population.