

Providence Journal – “Candidates for R.I. governor discuss homelessness, mental illness”

By Paul Davis

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## Candidates for R.I. governor discuss homelessness, mental illness

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By Paul Davis

Journal Staff Writer

PROVIDENCE —The state must do more to help the state’s 1,430 homeless residents, six gubernatorial candidates said Wednesday.

Two candidates pointed to the recent death of David “Doc” St. Germain as a reason why officials must spend more on shelters, affordable housing and early intervention and treatment.

St. Germain, who lived in an apartment at the Crossroads Rhode Island homeless shelter, apparently committed suicide by jumping from the roof of the Providence Place mall garage on Friday. He often lobbied for the poor and homeless at the State House.

“I knew Doc,” said independent candidate Todd Giroux. “We have to ask ourselves, did we do everything we could have? I’ll say yes,” he said, but added, “Tomorrow we will do more.”

Officials should house the homeless in state-owned buildings and build a new facility for them, said Giroux at a forum on mental illness at Rhode Island School of Design’s Metcalf Auditorium on North Main Street. The Save Our Mental Health Services Coalition sponsored the event, and asked the candidates to answer questions on homelessness, mental-health care and reform.

The issue is timely. The state’s homeless population is the highest since officials started keeping numbers more than 20 years ago.

The group includes 1,500 veterans, many of them grappling with psychological or physical problems, said Democrat Frank T. Caprio.

“We need to make sure every veteran coming back to the U.S. and Rhode Island doesn’t have to sleep on the street,” Caprio said.

The state is doing some things right, such as supporting the Housing First program, said independent candidate [Lincoln D. Chafee](#).

The program places the chronically homeless in subsidized housing — and keeps them out of the courts, jails and emergency rooms, which can cost taxpayers money, he said.

The candidates also talked about ways to keep the mentally ill out of jail.

According to the Save Our Mental Health Services Coalition, hundreds of men and women with mental illness are in the state prison. Many have committed minor offenses tied to a lack of health care, they say.

Taking people out of the prison system “who shouldn’t be there in first place ... is crucial and correct,” said Moderate Party candidate Kenneth J. Block.

But state officials, facing a huge deficit, must overhaul state spending first, he said. Officials must “wring the waste and fraud” out of the social safety net. The programs are needed, but “many people are stealing” from them, he said.

Judges and the police must also be more sensitive to mental-health issues, the candidates said.

But mental-health workers should not be too quick to identify residents as different, said independent candidate Joseph M. Lusi.

“Mental health and crime may be related, but they are separate,” he said. Some people with mental issues have also been brilliant, he said. “Abraham Lincoln was reputedly bipolar.”

For Republican candidate John Robitaille, the questions hit home.

“I lost my 23-year-old daughter to suicide,” he said. “She was diagnosed as having bipolar disorder.” As a father, “I had to battle for her life through the current mental-health and judicial systems,” he said

Early intervention and more research are needed, he said.

“As governor, it will be one of my priorities to make sure mental-health issues are taken seriously.”

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