

The Star-Ledger

Published: February 15, 2012

By Dan Goldberg

TRENTON — Advocates met today to urge that the Special Needs Housing Trust Fund be replenished.

The \$200 million fund, created seven years ago and signed into law by then-Gov. Richard Codey, has exhausted nearly all its money and is no longer accepting applications.

The goal of the fund, according to a 2005 press release from Codey's office, was to "help create 10,000 new affordable housing opportunities for people with mental illness and other special needs."

That goal turned out to be optimistic. Though the fund provided for more than 2,000 beds, New Jersey still has more than 8,000 developmentally disabled people on a waiting list for homes and services. Some have been waiting more than a decade. Many live with parents who are seeking a place for their children before they themselves become too old to provide care.

At the meeting, a brainstorming session in the Statehouse annex, the need for new homes was well understood. The trick is how to pay for it.

Some members of advocacy groups made the point that state funding for new homes creates construction jobs and improves the economy. Others contended it makes more sense to appeal to legislators' sense of social justice, regardless of the cost.

The more than 50 men and women attending the meeting promised to take the message to their legislators and try to galvanize public support. They plan to explain the short and long-term benefits of creating affordable, appropriate housing for those with special needs by telling the stories of thousands of individual lives that have been changed by the fund.

"This is a campaign," said Arnold Cohen, policy coordinator for the Housing and Community Development Network, a statewide coalition of more than 250 groups. "Nobody knows what the housing trust has created unless it is us telling the story."