

WATCHDOG

# NJ disability watchdog criticizes group homes, cites abuse, neglect 'on a regular basis'



**Gene Myers**

NorthJersey.com

Published 4:05 a.m. ET May 27, 2022

New Jersey still can't ensure safe care for people with disabilities in group homes, according to a report by a state watchdog that says mistreatment is reported "on a regular basis."

"There is no question that abuse and neglect occur in some of our congregate settings," Paul Aronsohn, the state ombudsman for the disability community, said in the 30-page report, released earlier this month. "I cannot tell you how prevalent it is or why it occurs, but families share their horrifying pictures and stories with us on a regular basis."

Aronsohn cited a litany of complaints from residents of the state's 2,037 congregate care programs and their families, including verbal and physical abuse, the withholding of food, medication mix-ups and unsanitary conditions.

He credited the state Department of Human Services with taking some steps to address abuse, such as implementing the Stephen Komninos Law in 2018, requiring the state to conduct unannounced site visits to group homes and drug testing of staff as well as to notify parents or guardians when incidents occur.

Komninos, 22, choked to death in 2007 after he was left unsupervised by staff at the South Jersey home where he lived.

Human Services Department spokesman Tom Hester said the department was reviewing Aronsohn's report and took his concerns seriously, but he also defended the state's oversight of group homes.

In implementing the Komninos Law, the department has conducted 46,000 face-to-face visits with group home residents, resulting in 829 reports "covering a broad range of issues"

that were flagged for follow-up or investigation, Hester said. As a result, 177 people have been added to a registry of offenders against individuals with developmental disabilities.

Gov. Phil Murphy's administration "has taken important steps to address" the issue, according to the ombudsman's report. But more needs to be done, Aronsohn wrote.

Even after "the disturbing revelations" that came out of a 2019 investigation into two Bellwether Behavioral Health group homes in West Milford, "no new programs or processes have been put in place to ensure that other provider agencies do not engage in the same egregious practices," he added.

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Two residents at separate Bellwether homes in West Milford died from choking on food in May 2017. The state shut down the for-profit provider of residential and day programs after an independent investigator found that its homes were unclean, smelled of urine and had rotten food in the refrigerator. One home was found to have mixed up residents' medications.

At the time, a former staffer told NorthJersey.com and the USA TODAY Network that Bellwether group home employees would roll up residents in "wrap mats" and sit on them as a form of restraint. Other times, residents were put into restraints secured to the floor with carabiners.

Aronsohn suggests the administration should lead discussions about abuse and neglect with families, advocates, providers and legislators.

"We should have a zero-tolerance policy with teeth. No excuses. No second chances," he said. "We should make it easier for individuals and families to report abuse and neglect, perhaps through one central phone number or web portal for anyone in New Jersey regardless of age, location, etc."

## **Staffing crisis**

Aronsohn, a former Ridgewood mayor, said the state needs to "dramatically change" the way it staffs home settings, with better training and more money for those who help residents with everyday life.

The disability community has long pushed for higher wages for those who assist with daily needs, including bathing, clothing and feeding around the clock.

The state has approved three rate increases for the aides since 2019, and another is planned for January 2023. All four totaled will account for an additional \$4.75 per hour for each worker, bringing the median wage to \$17.86 an hour, according to the state.

Aronsohn's report noted that the pay is “about the same rate paid to a child employed by a retail store,” adding that “working a full-time, 40-hour week, this wage is only between \$27,000 and \$33,000 per year — before taxes are deducted.”

He cited the disconnect between the low wages they receive and the work they do to support people with “significant medical, physical and/or behavioral needs.”

Aronsohn offers two “no-cost, easy-to-implement recommendations” for all of the issues listed in his report. First, he said, “People in authority should personally spend time with people with disabilities and their families.”

Outsourced case managers, advisory boards and intermediaries have cut decision makers off from the people they are serving. In addition, those in authority should hire and appoint people with disabilities and their families, who currently don't have a seat at the table.

"They are adults. They have the right to agency in their lives," said Catherine Chin, executive director of the Alliance for the Betterment of Citizens with Disabilities, a trade group representing group homes.

Chin, who has yet to read the report, said, "it's a fight for civil rights. We are not there yet, but we'll get there."

*Gene Myers covers disability and mental health for NorthJersey.com and the USA Today Network. For unlimited access to the most important news from your local community, please subscribe or activate your digital account today.*

*Email: [myers@northjersey.com](mailto:myers@northjersey.com)*

*Twitter: @myersgene*

