

Ombudsman Report Cites Continued Abuse in Group Homes

By Jonathan Jaffe

On Christmas of last year, a group home in Bayville dropped Brandon Quesada off at the Community Medical Center in Toms River.

According to his mother, Priscilla, her son, now 23, had been eating the kitchen's spices and hitting a window with his hand, prompting the group home to "abandon" him at the hospital, where he ultimately stayed for 76 days, she said.

Since that time, the mom has been taking care of Brandon at her Egg Harbor Township home, as he requires extensive care for autism and a bipolar disorder. Of the six group homes Brandon has lived in since age 14, Quesada claims he has been abused at five and abandoned on Christmas at the sixth.

"He's been strangled. He's endured a smashed left eye. He has had bruises and lots of rug burns over his face and body," the mother said.

"Group homes just don't have the trained staff to work with autistic people who can't express themselves verbally. If he hits them, they can't hit him. It isn't fair."

Quesada said she is done with group homes and will now be self-directing the care of her son at a home near her, where she can supervise his care under cameras.

"All of us parents are afraid to die because we don't know what the hell will happen to our kids," Quesada said. "It's scary. It's all about the money in group homes and there's no accountability."

Quesada has sought the help of Paul Aronsohn, who says she is just one of the regular

calls he receives from families reporting abuse and neglect.

As the state ombudsman for individuals with intellectual or developmental disabilities and their families, Aronsohn hears from desperate people every day who claim their need is immediate and a matter of basic health and safety.

"I have a haunting feeling that many adults who need supports and services are effectively being shut out of the system," said Aronsohn, in his 2021 annual report to the governor and state legislature. He cites cultural, language and socio-economic barriers.

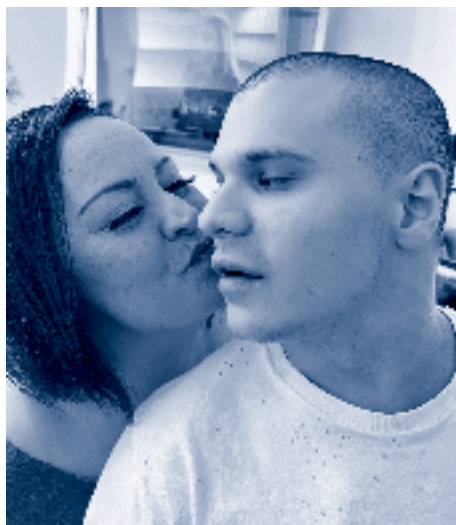
And he also cites ongoing abuse and neglect in group homes.

"Families share horrifying pictures and stories with us on a regular basis," Aronsohn said. "Sometimes it is in the form of physical injuries. Sometimes it is in the form of locked bedroom doors, with-

held food, incorrect medication administration, unsanitary conditions or some other inhumane treatment. Sometimes it is verbal and psychological, expressing itself in demeaning and degrading behavior toward an individual."

The ombudsman was quick to note the Murphy Administration takes such allegations "very seriously" and key steps to prevent it. He cited, for example, the Komninos Law, implemented in 2018 to further protect people with intellectual or developmental disabilities.

Stephen Komninos, 22, died Oct. 8, 2007 from choking on a bagel that he ate while unsupervised. The law doubles annual unannounced



Brandon Quesada with his mother, Priscilla
—Photo Courtesy of Priscilla Quesada

inspections, requires employees to undergo drug tests and mandates that group home operators disclose injuries within two to eight hours, depending upon the severity and circumstances.

“That said, there is clearly a disconnect here. Despite all of the good faith efforts, the abuse and neglect persists,” the ombudsman said. “Despite all of the information brought to light over the past couple of year—through legislative hearings, news stories and personal pleas from families—I am not aware of any new proactive initiatives to reduce, if not eliminate, abuse and neglect.”

Aronsohn said he has not seen any new transparency measures to shine a bright light on abuse and neglect. And except for a very recent effort to develop “core competencies,” there has been no new effort to meaningfully enhance compensation and training for direct service professionals (DSPs), he said.

In the ombudsman’s report, he quotes a hospital psychiatric evaluation for an 18-year-old group home resident, dated December 2021: “I have the impression that this patient has been physically and mentally declining deconditioning (sic) probably related with poor care in her group home.”

The report pulls another quote from a parent of a child who died last year in a group home. The parent is quoted in March as saying, “I don’t know why I didn’t push more. Actually, I do know why. I was afraid of retaliation. The agency was very spiteful. But if I had pushed more, maybe he would still be here.”

The ombudsman suggests four action items:

- The Administration should lead an open and frank discussion about abuse and neglect with individuals, families, advocates, providers and legislators.
- The state should enact a zero-tolerance policy with no excuses or second chances
- It should be easier for individuals and families to report abuse and neglect, perhaps through one single, central phone number or portal.
- There should be an increase in the salary, training and expectations of direct support professionals.

In response to the report, a spokesman for the state Department of Human Services

provided a written statement: “We appreciate the Ombudsman’s efforts to be a resource for families and are reviewing his report as we are always interested in feedback that may further strengthen our service system for individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

State officials added: “Human Services remains steadfast in its commitment to helping individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities thrive in their communities and to continuing a strong partnership with families. The Department demands the best from the providers and caregivers that support the individuals we serve, and our top priority is always the health and safety of individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

The statement concludes here: “All complaints are taken seriously and investigated thoroughly by a robust system of oversight and monitoring critical to helping ensure the health, safety and wellbeing of individuals receiving services and supports.”

Aronsohn’s 30-page report also looks into other areas of concern, such as the state’s highest-in-the-nation autism rates, challenges with limited housing options and an appeals process that appears weighted against the families.

Thomas Baffuto, executive director of The Arc of New Jersey, said he is “deeply troubled” by allegations of abuse and neglect in the report. “It pains us when we see this, but the issue is not as rampant as claimed,” he said.

Baffuto said such allegations drag down hard-working DSPs, painting the entire system with the same soiled brush.

“We need to identify and eliminate bad apples, with zero tolerance for abuse and neglect,” he said. “But the truth is a lot of families of residents in group homes are not having this problem. It is not consistent with what I am hearing from families. But that does not mean we shouldn’t take this report seriously.”

Valerie Sellers, CEO of the New Jersey Association of Community Providers, notes that Aronsohn’s annual report consistently includes complaints from families who call him with allegations of neglect, abuse and exploitation within the state system.

“We are talking about human behavior that we are trying to control through education and training,” said Sellers, whose association includes 67 providers in New Jersey. “Sometimes you have bad players. But until we start providing the appropriate salary for DSPs, we will not be able to recruit more qualified individuals.”

Sellers said an average starting salary for a DSP in New Jersey is about \$14.25 an hour, an annual salary of about \$30,000 per year, and just north of the \$13 minimum wage in the state.

“Meanwhile, Target is paying \$24 an hour, Chick-fil-A is at \$19 an hour and Amazon is paying \$21 an hour,” she said. “Serving as a DSP is a hard, 24/7 job. Many people with disabilities can’t communicate, or have severe behavioral issues or become violent. DSPs need to prepare food, do feedings, change diapers, administer medication and take people to the doctor.”

Sellers said it is “appalling” that the lowest-paid professions in New Jersey involve taking care of seniors, people with disabilities and children.

To reduce cases of alleged abuse or neglect, Sellers said, her association is planning to develop training videos to serve as visual guides for how best to care for people, noting training manuals or computer modules are just not as effective.

“We need to show, for example, the most appropriate way to guide someone into a van that does not require pulling an arm,” Sellers said. “One might say that is abuse. We need to visually show DSPs the proper way. And that can’t easily be done on a computer screen.”

For those who question the validity of his report, Aronsohn replied: “It breaks my heart that anyone would downplay or dismiss the fact that abuse and neglect are realities for many folks within our system.”



Brandon Quesada showing injuries that his family claims occurred in his group home

—Photo Courtesy of Priscilla Quesada

A critical issue is staffing. The state does not have a mandated ratio of staff to residents in group homes, the ombudsman said, noting that some facilities may just have one employee to handle a myriad of issues overnight.

“Understaffed houses allow for abuse and neglect,” Aronsohn said. “It can take many forms, such as someone locked in a room because there is no one to take them outside. It could be about poor nutrition, like getting served a box of macaroni and cheese for dinner. Or having no air conditioning for a prolonged period of time. Or living in a dirty house. Or being berated by a staff member,

who suggests taking the issue outside.”

His recommendations in the 2021 report mimic those from his 2020 report, in which he also expressed grave concerns about abuse and neglect in group homes.

Aronsohn wrote in 2020: “People may disagree about the prevalence of abuse or neglect, but there is absolutely no denying it exists. The New Jersey State Assembly Human Services Committee held two hearings that made that painfully clear.”

In his report, Aronsohn agreed that DSPs need to be paid as professionals, as well as provided with better training and other supports.

“We can’t think for a second that paying a DSP \$16 an hour is enough,” he said. “How could such an important job be worth so little? If we paid people a realistic professional salary, there would be better outcomes and life experiences. And there would also be less staff turnover and less staff depending on Medicaid, food assistance and housing assistance. And there would be less trips to the ER.”

Those with concerns about abuse, neglect or exploitation are urged to contact the state Division of Developmental Disabilities Abuse and Neglect Hotline at 1-800-832-9173. Every case is handled anonymously. **P&F**