

## WATCHDOG

# NJ system to investigate group homes would be overhauled under bill

*7-minute read*

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## Key Points AI-assisted summary ⓘ

- New Jersey lawmakers have proposed several bills to overhaul the state's group home system for people with developmental disabilities.
- One bill aims to create a "Justice Center," modeled after New York's system, to independently investigate abuse and neglect allegations.
- Additional legislation includes installing cameras in common areas and changing how medications are administered to residents.

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New Jersey's system for investigating abuse and neglect of people with developmental disabilities would be overhauled under a newly proposed bill, one of an array of legislative fixes now pending that aim to make the state's troubled \$1.5 billion group home system safer for its vulnerable residents.

The newest bill comes after NorthJersey.com's 2025 investigation [Hidden at Home](#) revealed serious lapses in the basic care of group home residents, dozens of preventable deaths and a failure to investigate all unexpected deaths.

New Jersey leaves group home companies to investigate most abuse and neglect allegations, while the state is slow to act against poorly-performing providers, NorthJersey.com found.

The proposal is part of a package that includes yet another measure designed to control how public money is spent by group home companies, which can receive

more than \$500,000 in taxpayer funds for a resident's care.

***Story continues below photo gallery.***

These and other bills, which would require such things as placing monitoring cameras in common areas and a change in oversight of medication administration, are making their way through the legislative process in a session that will reset Jan. 20 — when New Jersey swears in its new governor, Democrat Mikie Sherrill.

Where do the measures stand during the lame-duck period, and what's the likelihood they become law by passing both full chambers and winning Gov. Phil Murphy's signature?

## **'Justice Center' overhaul of investigations**

Advocates have urged leaders to improve investigations into group homes by mirroring New York's Justice Center, a third-party entity that handles the bulk of abuse and neglect allegations. It was launched in 2013 after a New York Times exposé of abuse and neglect in facilities overseen by New York State.

In early December, Assemblyman Alex Sauickie, R-Monmouth, put forward [A6137](#), which would create a Justice Center for the Garden State, "in but not of" the Department of Law and Public Safety.

"We know it's broke, no question, so we need to fix it and put in a model that is working," Sauickie said.

Currently the Department of Human Services is responsible for oversight of the group home system, including licensing and inspecting residences and investigating the most severe cases of abuse and neglect.

An agency spokesman did not respond to questions about the proposal. Since May, the Department of Human Services has not acknowledged — or responded to — any

queries from the NorthJersey.com reporters who produced the Hidden at Home series.

Sauickie's proposed office would be divided into two units, civil and criminal, each led by a new deputy director. The criminal deputy director would have the power to prosecute criminal cases, as well as work closely with law enforcement.

Under the bill, investigations would need to be completed within 90 days — though extensions are allowed. Currently, state investigators take an average of up to six months to complete inquiries into group home and community provider cases.

[NorthJersey.com spoke to families](#) who have waited more than a year for results.

Sauickie has heard the same in conversations with families. “Even if there was some level of investigation, I had constituents describing it as a black hole,” he said. “They weren’t getting updates.”

The office would also include a “Mortality and Abuse Prevention Medical Review Board” composed of 11 medical specialists appointed by the governor. The board would review all deaths and investigate the causes of “unusual” deaths.

Currently, a team of two nurses and two supervisors review paperwork — including care plans, death certificates and hospital records — and decide whether a case should be referred for investigation, what ombudsman Paul Aronsohn calls [a “cursory” mortality review](#).

Under Sauickie’s bill, the Justice Center would publish an annual report with data on investigation results, patterns and trends, and corrective actions taken.

New Jersey’s Department of Human Services does not publish any report on the deaths of people with developmental disabilities who live in the homes it licenses.

Parent advocate Donna Icovino said such a third-party entity would “remove the inherent investigative conflict-of-interest issues currently posed by DHS and providers.”

The state ombudsman for individuals with intellectual or developmental disabilities has repeatedly pointed to New York as inspiration.

"We recommend a complete overhaul of the investigations process — one that would inject much needed rigor, transparency and objectivity into the process," Aronsohn wrote in remarks to the Legislature.

"To this end, we recommend that we look to New York's Justice Center for the Protection of People with Special Needs as a model for us to consider here in New Jersey," he wrote.

The Arc of New Jersey, an advocacy group with county chapters that operate group homes, is reaching out to Sauickie to discuss his proposals.

"When it comes to investigations, we can all agree that we need a system that is clear, transparent, efficient and effective," said Executive Director Céline Fortin. "Providers need to also have clarity and standardization of the process, as well as timeliness to findings and resolutions. They also need a mechanism for appeal."

Sauickie said he introduced the legislation in December because "it's important we bring attention and awareness to this as soon as possible."

## **70% of funds must be used on direct care of residents**

The assemblyman's other proposal mandates that at least 70% of taxpayer funds collected by group home companies must be used for the direct care of residents with disabilities. It doesn't strictly define direct care, leaving that to the state human services commissioner.

It requires providers to report revenues to the department annually, along with a breakdown of spending, including staff wages, taxes, administrative costs and profit.

“We felt it was important a message is sent: If you’re getting taxpayer money, you’d better be taking care of them,” Sauwickie said.

He called the proposal “a starting point” for discussion, saying, “I don’t want to pretend to know all the operating expenses.”

Currently, there are no such standards.

“What incentivizes those getting half a million dollars per individual to spend it on the operations versus taking so much off the top and then trying to minimize cost?” he said. “Nursing homes have these kind of percentages. In fact, they are higher than what we have proposed.”

New Jersey [nursing homes](#) are required to spend 90% of their taxpayer revenue on direct care.

“I do not anticipate them being heard in lame duck,” Sauwickie said. “I absolutely expect to reintroduce them in the new session.”

## **Other limits on spending**

Sen. Joe Vitale, D-Middlesex, offered a stricter limit on how program revenue could be spent, capping executive compensation, administrative costs and profits at 15% in [S3752](#) introduced last October.

The most far-reaching legislation in his seven-bill proposal — written in concert with the Department of Human Services — the effort has stalled in the Senate Health, Human Services and Senior Citizens committee, which he chairs.

Vitale said in May that it was not put up for a vote due to “pushback from the provider community” at an earlier hearing.

Providers have called his bill government overreach, saying it could put them out of business, prevent them from attracting top candidates and stifle flexibility, innovation and growth.

"It will result in poorer quality care due to brain drain, an inability to innovate, and less money for care from increased costs of compliance," Matt Binder, the senior advocacy specialist at Easterseals New Jersey, wrote in testimony last year.

## Vitale's other group home bills

During the lame-duck session, Vitale said, he "is hoping to advance" three bills in his package:

- [S3750](#) introduces first-ever fines that would be levied against providers with serious concerns, such as substantiated cases of abuse, provisional licenses or failing to run required background checks. It needs to be heard by the Senate budget committee before a full Senate vote. The bill advanced through the Assembly Health committee on Dec. 11. Assemblywoman Carol Murphy, D-Burlington, the sponsor, mentioned that the Legislature is still considering amendments.
- [S3754](#) creates an advisory committee to review certain deaths of people with developmental disabilities, as well as cases of abuse, neglect or exploitation. It gives the committee two years to conduct the review. The full Senate needs to pass the bill, while the Assembly has not moved it out of the Aging and Human Services Committee.
- [S3751](#) changes which state agency investigates abuse and neglect cases involving 18- to 21-year-olds, moving the responsibility to the Department of Children and Families. The bill needs a full Senate vote, and hasn't yet moved out of the Assembly Children, Families and Food Security Committee.

A spokesperson for Assembly Democrats declined to comment on whether it planned to post any of the group home bills.

The Department of Human Services already implemented one of Vitale's proposals without passage of his bill. It hired a "director of medical services" who could review complex medical cases — [with a salary of \\$240,000](#), according to a job posting.

The remaining bills — which Vitale did not list as priorities during lame duck — include legislation to establish a framework to appoint a receiver to poorly-performing providers, as well as another bill that mandates companies to turn in a workforce study.

## **Cameras, medication administration**

Another attempt to install more cameras in group homes, and a bill that changes how medication is administered, are not likely to advance this session.

Sen. Kristin Corrado, R-Passaic, proposed the most recent version of a bill that would require group homes to put in electronic monitoring cameras in common areas for homes with the consent of all residents or their guardians.

“I remain optimistic that this bill will be brought before a committee for consideration and a vote,” Corrado said. “We have incorporated substantial changes to alleviate many of the concerns expressed during earlier discussions. If the bill does not progress this session, I am committed to reintroducing it in the next legislative cycle.”

Assemblywoman Aura Dunn, R-Morris, introduced a bill requiring a nurse — or a certified medication aide working under the supervision of a nurse — to administer medication in group homes and supervised apartments in response to a 21-year-old's sudden death, [reported by NorthJersey.com](#).

Katherine “Katie” Moronski died just two days after moving into a group home for adults with developmental disabilities in Sussex County, as a result of a fatal mix of her prescription medications, which the staff was responsible for administering.

“Not due to any kind of lack of trying … the bill is not gaining the traction I would have liked to have seen,” Dunn said. “I don't see it moving during this lame-duck session.”

She said she plans to reintroduce the bill next session and added that she had since toured programs that have medication dispensing machines, which intrigued her but still left lingering questions.

“It still requires a human to load it, and when there are medication changes or prescription changes, that's where a lot of the errors occur, and the poor record keeping,” Dunn said.

“Recognizing that there are risks with shift changes, and the potential for human error ... you can't remove that human interaction and human oversight,” she said.