

Hills council wants discussion about group home placement

By Joanne Maliszewski
staff writer

The latest controversy over a proposed group home for mentally retarded adults has come and gone, but

Farmington Hills officials want to talk about what to do with residents' concerns about such homes. Although a date has not yet been scheduled, Farmington Hills City Council members informally agreed Mon-

day to put discussion of group homes on a future meeting agenda.

THE DECISION followed comments from residents and some council members about what they feel was a lack of

cooperation from group home proponents, particularly in the latest attempt to build a group home in the Briar Hill subdivision.

"MORC (Macomb Oakland Regional Center) is going to be proceeding. If the city wants a committee, they should be proceeding now," said City Attorney Paul Bibeau.

MORC is a Clinton Township-based agency of the state Department of Mental Health. The agency sponsors and monitors group homes.

A committee could also draw up guidelines for group homes in the city although MORC would not be forced to follow them, Bibeau said.

Bibeu's suggestion came after he reported to council that the Briar Hill residents withdrew their lawsuit to prevent construction of a group home on Old Bedford.

BRIAR HILL neighbors had asked the city council in early September to join their lawsuit. City officials declined that offer. But they questioned whether the state Department of Mental Health properly notified the city

about the home's proposed site in the neighborhood north of 13 Mile, west of Farmington Road.

Bibeu indicated he would have recommended the city council avoid joining the residents' lawsuit because, according to his research, the state Department of Mental Health followed proper notification procedures.

Despite Bibeu's findings, some council members remained disgruntled with the manner in which group homes are placed within a community and the uncertainty over whom to talk with when concerns arise.

"There's nothing wrong with a committee," said Councilman Ben Marks. "I think there should be an opportunity where they (residents with complaints about group homes) are listened to and appreciated, at least for their opinion."

ALTHOUGH SOME council members favored the formation of a committee to deal with concerns, Councilwoman Joan Dudley had another idea. City officials should invite "someone of substance" from the state Department of Mental Health or state Department of Social Services to discuss

group homes with both city officials and residents. "Let's get these issues out on the table," she said.

While some council members wanted a committee to hear residents' complaints, others want to have a voice in site selection. Councilman Donna Wolf suggested going to Lansing and working to change state laws that enable the placement of group homes in communities without local approval.

"Rather than a site committee, let's go to Lansing and change the law," Wolf said. "... those neighbors are depending on us to do something."

Wolf suggested that the reason city councils don't run interference between area residents and agencies such as MORC is "because they are afraid to get into it."

DUDLEY OBJECTED to Wolf's comments. "I happen to support the law. I am not afraid of the state," she said. "Just because we don't want to fight the law, maybe it's because we're not against the law."

Opposed to the formation of a local committee, Dudley said the state's objectivity in placement is equitable.

Suit over planned home ended

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said. "There's no live-in person who is responsible," she said. "I feel the residents or patients deserve some continuity to their care."

Clark acknowledges that group homes do not have live-in supervision. But staff is in the house at all times day and night, he said.

"The staff comes in on a shift basis," Clark said. "We have actually found over the years that there is more consistency. Even with a live-in who has hours off, they never get away. There's a higher degree of burn-out then."

Gerber also questions the training of the direct care staff. Most, she maintained, are low-wage earners, have a minimum amount of training for the job and, as a result, are not as dedicated to their work as they should be when working with mentally retarded adults. "EVERY WEEK, I see ads for direct care givers (group home employees). I feel it means there's a high turnover," she said.

"I think it takes highly skilled people to work with profoundly mentally retarded people," Gerber added. But Clark said those who decide to enter direct care work make a tradeoff between their interest in such work and

high pay. That doesn't mean these employees have little interest in group home clients, he said.

Clark equates the job with that of being a parent. Parents have little training when their children come along. But the most important qualifications for the job are "caring and patience," he said.

Direct care employees must be at least 18 years of age and of good moral character, Clark said. The employees are trained before being placed in a group home, he added.

CLARK ALSO disagreed with Gerber's remarks that most direct care workers are quite young and lack heavy training.

Studies have been conducted, Clark said, that indicate the average age of the direct care worker is 22, most have some amount of college education, many are taking college classes while working and many have advanced college degrees.

"The quality of the staff overall I think is exceptional," Clark said, adding many are promoted to house managers and some become development specialists for MORC.

In conjunction with what she feels is inadequate training, Gerber said she is

concerned that direct care workers dispense medication to group home residents. "We question whether this is appropriate," Gerber said.

Direct care workers, Clark said, are trained in "medical-type issues" as well as dispensing medication.

"THE NUMBER of folks we serve have no more of an unusual need for medication than you or I," Clark said.

"We make a concerted effort to minimize any medication. Every pill is accounted for and recorded. Everyone with minimal training can dispense pills. We're not talking about folks giving injections."



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