Myths cloud group home controversy

By Mary Rodriquo
staff writer

The notion that group home placement for the mentally retarded has accelerated in the past few years and that most homes receive community opposition are myths, according to a state Department of Mental Health (DMH) spokesman.

"(Michigan) had 26,000 people in institutions in 1965. The number went down to 16,000 in 1975. In the past 10 years, the number has dropped from 16,000 to 12,500," said Benson Censoni, DMH deputy director of the bureau of community residential services.

"Movement out of institutions has been much slower in the past 10 years. Last year, 40 percent of all the people we placed were from private homes," said Censoni.

Regarding community opposition, residents or municipal officials asked their legislator to intervene in one out of five group home proposals eight years ago. Today, it's still a one-in-five proposition, Censoni said.

He made his remarks before an audience of city officials from various Michigan communities assembled for a conference on foster care facilities at the Livonia Holiday Inn.

"FOR US, the best of all worlds is when we and the local municipality agree on a site," Censoni said. "We increasingly see across the state greater cooperation. We will not give up on our basic philosophy of placing homes in neighborhoods."

Another myth surrounding the group home controversy is that residents pose a danger to neighboring homeowners, Censoni said.

"There especially seems to be a fear of severely mentally retarded residents. The terminology may sound menacing, but they probably pose the least threat," Censoni said.

"Legislative studies have shown group home residents are less likely to commit crimes than the general population."

Who will be placed in a group home and where that home will be located is a decision made by several professionals.

"A primary effort is made to keep (residents) close to their families," Censoni said. "Thirty-five percent of the people in institutions today have no known family roots. They've been disconnected."

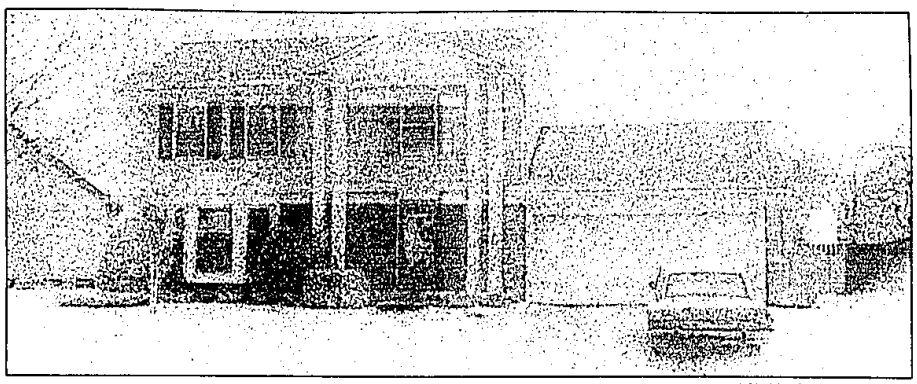
THE STATE has built 220 group homes to meet the necessary barrier-free requirements of the residents, many of whom are physically handicapped.

"In those instances, we try to assimilate the building facade to the neighborhood," Censoni said. "We don't want the house to look different."

In answer to questions from the assembled municipal leaders, Censoni said that Michigan's 1,500-foot requirement (group homes must be spaced that distance apart) is one of the most restrictive laws in the country.

"Many states have a 500-foot requirement," he said. "It will become an issue in some areas like Detroit where we are running out of space."

The mental health department operates 27 state institutions and 55 community mental health boards. More than 100,000 residents receive some kind of service, Censoni said.



JERRY ZOLYNSKY/staff photographer

More than 2,000 adult foster care facilities are in neighborhoods like this throughout the state. Such homes are in both Farmington and Farmington Hills.

SAUL COOPER, executive director of the Washtenaw County Community Mental Health Board, said clients are primarily placed in urban settings because they come from urban areas.

"It's not simply a matter of moving everyone to a rural environment. There would be a tremendous cost for services — primarily transportation to get these residents to workshop or programs.

"The (group home placement) dilemma is that it's a state mandate and a state override," he said. "The municipality says 'over our dead bodies' or we hear nothing from them. If we talk about the best way to get in, fine. We need to dialogue on a positive basis.

"Everybody says 'we're in favor of group homes but not in our township.' We need a cooperative relationship between mental health staff, law enforcement and local municipalities," Cooper said.

David Callanan, a DMH lobbyist, said a video cassette library is being developed to provide graphic information on how the state develops group homes. "We also have been encouraging the state board of education to push textbook publishers on including information on the history, philosophy and civil rights of the handicapped."

Farmington Hills Councilman Ben Marks took part in a recent state conference on adult foster care facilities.

Group homes act — It prompts questions

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felt powerless over where the group homes are placed, enforcing local building and zoning codes, screening of residents and operators, and monitoring problems that may arise.

The state Legislature passed Public Act 218 in 1978, providing for licensing of adult foster care facilities.

"The idea was to get the mentally ill out of institutions and mainstream these individuals in a group home setting," explained Marla Ward, director of legislative services for the city of Southfield and the panel moderator.

James Quigley, director of the adult foster care licensing division of the Michigan Department of Social Services (DSS), explained how this is done.

AS HE put it: "An adult foster care family home is a private residence with one to six adults in addition to the residents of the home who continue to live there. Michigan has 2,061 adult foster care family homes.

"There are 1,721 homes for 12 or less. There are 250 large group homes with 13 to 20 residents and 24 congregate care facilities, with 21 or more residents. The congregate care facilities are being phased out.

"The largest majority we regulate are family homes for six or less."

His division receives applications from would-be group home operators and decides whether to grant the applicant a license to run the home. The state Department of Mental Health is involved in actual placement of residents, Quigley said.

"No one can operate an adult foster care facility without a license from us," Quigley said. "Our responsibility is really quite narrow."

APPLICANTS MUST disclose information on health and finances. DSS checks criminal history and previous licensing complaints if the applicant operated or worked in another group home.

Notice of application is sent to the local community. If the proposed site is for six or less residents, local officials must notify all homeowners within a 1,500-foot radius of the proposed location. If there is another adult residential facility within 1,500 feet, the local municipality must notify the state, and the application would be denied.

If DSS gets an original application for a group home for seven or more residents, the local community can approve or deny it.

Clarifying a portion of the act that Quigley said is often misunderstood, he told officials that local construction codes can be applied to foster care facilities as they would be to private residences.

A licensing consultant contracted by the state has inspection responsibilities in addition to reviewing employee records and the proposed program for the home. With that information, license is issued or denied.

"WE HAVE 700 applications out now," Quigley said. "Less than 40 percent will be licensed for various reasons."

One of three types of licenses is issued: temporary, to a facility that has not been licensed before and good for six months; provisional, limited to six months for a facility temporarily unable to conform to the act and application must again be made; and a regular license, good for two years.

In accordance with the act, municipalities have a right to file a complaint. DSS has 45 days to investigate the charge and make a decision.

Last year, 944 complaints were received and investigated, but Quigley had no statistics on the outcome of those investigations.

2 case histories — different results

By Mary Rodriquo
staff writer

The name Mary Wagner is a household word in the adult foster care licensing world.

An independent operator of 11 group homes in seven cities in Oakland County, Wagner is the shining example foster care administrators, group home neighbors and advocates point to in describing what is good about placing developmentally disabled residents into normal community settings.

Wagner is president of Community Living Sources. In 1968, she opened the first group home for mentally retarded residents in Michigan.

"I was a teacher and consultant in the Farmington School District," Wagner told a conference on adult foster care facilities. "I saw retarded students thrive, but once they graduated, they went back to living with their parents and not doing much."

With eight former students, she started her first group home in a former Farmington nursing home, living there with her husband and son. The number soon reached 12 and she rented the house next door.

AID TO the disabled legislation came into being and Wagner rented a former convent in Hazel Park for 12 residents and received $7.10 a day from the state per resident.

More group homes blossomed in the Southfield and Farmington areas and other cities. Although Wagner's homes are licensed by the state Department of Social Services (DSS), she operates independent of Department of Mental Health group homes.

"We select our own people," Wagner said. "There are 200 people on our waiting list. We have homes with up to 16 residents, and we charge a membership fee of $1,000 per family. We are completely responsible for our own homes."

Wagner's homes are special for a variety of reasons. She tries to cater to the needs of the particular group. For example, one building houses 10 senior citizens between the ages of 55 and 67. She models programming to fit their specific needs.

"We have live-in managers in all of our homes and eight of 11 are special education teachers with degrees," she said. "One couple has been with us for eight years. We don't have much turnover of staff."

AN EIGHT-PASSENGER van is assigned to each house to transport residents to special workshops, jobs, programs and medical appointments. A social worker is assigned to each home.

"We have different levels of homes," she said. "Some are very low functioning. Others can go into the community with aides."

Wagner credits her success to using a common sense approach to group home placement.

Marilyn Clancy lives next door to one of Wagner's group homes in Southfield. Established in 1978, it houses high-functioning developmentally disabled residents.

Clancy attested to its success in an address before the adult foster care conference.

"INITIALLY, THE fear level was quite high," Clancy said. "Acceptance was gradual. As we got to know the home's supervisor, and saw them joining church and school activities, it was no longer an issue. We were exceptionally lucky."

Also on the dais with Wagner and Clancy were Jennings Shaver, a captain of the Southfield Police Department, and John Curtis, who lives next door to a youth foster care group home in Southfield.

The residents are not developmentally disabled. They are juvenile boys referred out of maximum security juvenile institutions. The home is licensed by the DSS.

Curtis described the havoc being wreaked on his neighborhood since the home was established in 1981. It included tales of arson, neighborhood burglaries and robberies.

"We were told these boys need to live in a normal environment but their behavior is not normal," Curtis said.

COMPLAINTS TO the home's supervisor have gone unheeded, Curtis said.

All smiles

The Farmington Hills Police Department Auxiliary threw a Christmas party for 20 children from the Sarah Fisher Home Dec. 22. The 10 Mile Elementary School in Farmington provided the setting. At right, Auxiliary member Dennis Stockol is shown with a bag of gifts by the Christmas tree set up in the school gym. The holiday fare included games, gifts, lunch and a puppet show staged by the police department's youth bureau. A winter outing for children at the home already is in the works, party co-chairmen Bill Bolin and Tom Drake said. The Auxiliary is part of the police department's operations bureau, commanded by inspector Thomas Godwin.

RICK SMITH/staff photographer