

"Federation Corner" column
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Testimony on group homes

by Dan Wilhelm
MCCF President

The article that follows is part of the written testimony given on June 21, 2005 by H. Joseph Coughlin Jr., of the Valleybrook Family Coalition before the Maryland General Assembly Joint Committee on Children, Youth and Families dealing with group homes.

The recent articles in the Baltimore Sun highlighted extensive problems and abuses with the state and county run Group Home Program in Maryland. Adolescent residents of these homes have been abused, injured or worse. Too many of the companies hired by the state and / or local governments to run these homes have misspent taxpayers' funds and neighbors and neighborhoods in the areas of the Group Homes have been placed in danger. All of this is due either to the mismanagement of these homes by contractors hired to run them, or by the inadequate design and / or management oversight of this Program and these Homes by State and /or local agencies, or both.

Back in April when the Sun articles began appearing, we learned by accident, that a Group Home for troubled teens was being proposed for our neighborhood. Having then read and followed the articles with great interest, we became increasingly concerned and alarmed about the safety of our neighbors and our neighborhood. We are also very concerned about the safety and well being of the kids the Program is supposed to help, and about the wise use of our taxes used to fund the State Program.

Many Group Homes and some Residential Group Homes appear to be well run, but many of those for troubled teens are not.

We also realized that before we formed our opinions about the State Group Home Program we needed to do homework to find out more about the Program. We talked to: the Sun reporters who wrote the articles, our elected representatives at the State and County levels and State and County employees involved in the administration of the program. We also attempted to search the Internet in general and the Maryland State Government web site in specific, for more detailed background information on what the Group Home Program is supposed to be about and how it is supposed to operate.

The community and neighbors met with the operator of the group home proposed for our neighborhood. We are not comfortable with many of the responses provided, however as they appeared to be self serving and with further research on our part, many of those responses proved not to be factually accurate.

In order to be as informed as possible we even took the further step of visiting the neighborhoods of the three Group Homes managed by same operator in Prince Georges County and talked to some of the neighbors living next to and / or near to those Group Homes. Stories of personal injury and abuse, improper and disruptive behavior, property damage to neighbors, surfaced from neighbors.

We then decided to check with the local police in those areas to see if there had been any reports of incidents at those homes. Another eye-opener. We discovered numerous such complaints related to all three facilities listing such categories of complaints as assaults, attempted suicides, weapons, thefts, routinely missing Group Home residents, disorderly conduct etc.

As a result of the extensive problems that are occurring related to the residential Group Home program for troubled adolescents, the people of Maryland are its victims: the kids who are supposed to be helped and their families, the neighbors and neighborhoods where these Homes are allowed by the State of Maryland and the local jurisdictions to be placed and the taxpayers, who are paying for this troubled program.

However, rather than focusing on "how did it happen", my neighbors and I would like to focus on "what can be done to fix it." In that regard we have the following suggestions:

In general:

The General Assembly, together with the appropriate offices within the Governor's Office and the Executive Branch, should review both the entire structure, as well as administration of the Maryland Group Home Program, to include its statutory provisions and its implementing regulations, procedures and guidelines to identify its specific problem areas and develop specific solutions to fix those problems in all areas to include legislative, regulatory and administrative measures, as appropriate.

Until that process is completed a temporary moratorium should be called by the State of Maryland on the processing and / or approval of any applications, licenses, permits or any other form of approval of any residential Group Homes for troubled adolescents that have not completed the process and are in an operational mode.

Review the Group Home governing statutes and regulations to determine the appropriateness of locating such Group Homes in residential neighborhoods and whether they should be planned for very low density or more rural locations where there is little likelihood of severe impact on the safety of residential neighbors and neighborhoods.

Consideration needs to be made to distance restrictions to avoid locating proposed group home facilities for troubled adolescents in proximity to schools, churches, day care centers and nursing home facilities to protect these and other vulnerable populations.:

Review the State's minimum qualifications for company ownership and staff who are approved for running these Group Homes and tighten them so that more qualified companies and staff are charged with the responsibility for running these Homes. 18 year olds should not be allowed to be counselors for teenagers. The minimum age for such responsibilities should be at least 21 and possibly higher. Provide more inspectors for the State agency(ies) that are charged with the administration of the Maryland Group Home Program.

(6 other recommendations were also provided in the testimony.)

We believe that if these suggestions are given serious consideration and acted upon, that the results will significantly improve both the operation as well as effectiveness of Maryland Group Home Program.

Additional hearings are scheduled: Budget and Tax Committee on September 20, 2005, and the Joint Committee on Children Youth and Families on September 13.