

Autism Research Review

I N T E R N A T I O N A L

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Reviewing biomedical and educational research in the field of autism and related disorders

Group home investigation reveals widespread problems

After a year-long investigation into community residential programs, a Congressional subcommittee headed by Representative Ron Wyden reports that "millions of Americans with [retardation and developmental disabilities] are at risk from poor quality care, questionable and even criminal management practices by service providers, and lackluster monitoring by public health and welfare agencies."

The Congressional report follows a recent exposé of group homes by the *Miami Herald* and an earlier investigation by the *Los Angeles Times*, both of which found severe and life-threatening problems in some homes in their areas.

While stressing that "many, if not most homes for the mentally retarded and developmentally disabled are clean, safe and well-managed facilities," the subcommittee report said that others are cause for "grave concern," and quoted Jay Klein of the Institute for Disabilities at the University of New Hampshire, who said that "the system we've set up is crazy...what we are building is disability ghettos."

Subcommittee staff members found that:

—Some providers operating networks of homes (sometimes in several states) are chronic violators of both Medicaid regulations and public health codes.

Subcommittee members documented ongoing problems at small community facilities including "poorly trained and abusive staff, inadequate oversight of medication, poor food, dangerous sanitary conditions, lax accounting and record keeping." Problems ranged from filthy homes and dirty clothing for clients to outright physical abuse; for example, five homes in California were finally closed after one staff member was arrested for sexual battery and others were accused of physical violence against clients, including breaking a client's arm. At one Michigan home, residents were beaten by the staff for talking to reporters and government investigators about poor conditions. A number of parents of children in group homes testified that they were refused access to medical records and other critical information.

The report notes that in most states inspection and auditing teams are grossly understaffed, and perform only infrequent inspections, which are usually scheduled beforehand with providers. When they do visit, the report claims, inspectors are often

less interested in the quality of care than in paperwork, which the report notes can be "easily altered and manipulated to satisfy regulatory requirements." "Unscrupulous providers," subcommittee members say,

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Jay Klein

"recognize that only the most blatant abusers will be targeted by state agencies. Merely by keeping a low profile, home operators can avoid careful scrutiny."

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—State regulatory agencies repeatedly fail to close homes cited for ongoing health and safety violations.

The report states that because community residential homes are overseen and funded by a maze of federal and state agencies there is confusion regarding authority and jurisdiction, leading to "poor oversight, and the continuation of unhealthy, financially abusive and even dangerous conditions at some homes." In addition, it notes, "providers operating multiple homes have tremendous clout in many states. Usually, if a home fails the residents have nowhere else to live. States cannot credibly threaten to shut down a home unless appropriate alternative living arrangements exist." The report cites a University of Minnesota study showing that about half of states surveyed reported rarely or never penalizing providers for deficiencies in the quality of their services.

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