



STATE OF CONNECTICUT
OFFICE OF PROTECTION AND ADVOCACY FOR
PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES
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TESTIMONY BEFORE THE PLANNING AND DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

Raised Bill No. 5176 AN ACT CONCERNING COMMUNITY RESIDENCES

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Co-chairs, Ranking Members, and Members of the Planning and Development Committee:

The Office of Protection and Advocacy for Persons with Disabilities (P&A) is a relatively small agency, operating pursuant to both federal and state mandates to serve as an independent safeguard against abuse, neglect and violations of rights on behalf of Connecticut residents with disabilities and their families.

Raised Bill No. 5176 AN ACT CONCERNING COMMUNITY RESIDENCES would create a notification mechanism around which opposition to the location of community residential programs would likely form and would create a task force to study the distribution of community residences throughout the state.

The community residence, or group home, concept—small, family-scale residences for people who have on-going needs for support and assistance—was first introduced in this country in the 1960s. Community residences are an alternative to warehousing people in large, congregate institutions.

Human services agencies have long lists of people waiting for residential supports. We need more of these programs. We do not need to be inviting more opposition to them. Over the years, agencies that operate community residences have gained considerable experience in managing these homes, and have developed various strategies for introducing the residents they serve to their neighbors. Overall, community residences – group homes – have amassed an excellent record, and studies have repeatedly demonstrated that they have no effects on property values, community safety, or their neighbor's quality of life.

People with cognitive and mental disabilities have a right to live in communities. To achieve that right, some people need the kind of supports that come with structured residential programs. And to achieve their purpose, those programs must be located in communities – not consigned to industrial parks or other commercial locations. Unlike a nursing home or a congregate institution, people who live in group homes can have their own belongings in their own rooms, eat home-cooked meals, watch the evening news in their own living rooms, and know what it is to live in a real home in a regular neighborhood.

To the extent that our sense of identity is often tied to the place we call home, living in a regular home in a regular neighborhood offers things that no congregate institution can.

The overall track record for most such residences is actually quite good, both in terms of their impact on their neighborhoods, and in terms of the opportunities and support they provide to residents. It is sometimes difficult to site community-based residential programs for people with

intellectual and psychiatric disabilities. Despite the availability of a number of studies demonstrating the benefits and generally benign nature of community based residential programs, news that a program is planning to open in a particular location often generates a “not-in-my-back-yard” response.

Citizens with disabilities have an equal right to live in our communities. The fact that they may require support in order to exercise that right should not subject them to levels of public scrutiny that other citizens do not have to endure.

The federal Fair Housing Amendments Act of 1988 (FHAA) prohibits acts and practices that deny housing to certain protected classes, including people with disabilities. The legislative history and various Federal Court decisions have made it clear that group homes for people with disabilities are protected by the Act, and that governmental practices – including things like requirements for notification to municipalities or neighbors prior to opening group residences – are prohibited.

The Office respectfully urges the Committee to reject this bill in its entirety.