The Importance of Accurate Terminology

Group Homes for Individuals with Developmental Disabilities and Residential Health Care Facilities.

The term “group home” is a generic term used to describe many different types of residential settings. In New Jersey the term “group home” is also a non-generic term, having a specific definition in regulation that govern a type of housing for individuals with developmental disabilities. This is the definition used by ABCD providers. Confusion can occur when one is describing a living situation as a group home and it is unclear whether the term is being used generically or non-generically, as is often the case when the term is used to describe a residential health care facility (RHCF).

The Division of Developmental Disabilities establishes regulatory requirements for the provision of residential services, including group homes, to people with developmental disabilities. In the group home residents share in the chores and management of the residence where staff provide supervision, training and/or assistance in a variety of forms and intensity as required to assist the individual in moving toward independence. ¹ Group homes for individuals with developmental disabilities are licensed by and subject to the rules of DHS/DDD.

Since 2005, Residential health care facilities (RHCF) have been licensed by the Department of Community Affairs due to the agency’s extensive experience with housing. The RHCF provides sheltered care and services, in a homelike setting, to residents who do not require skilled nursing care in order to assist residents to maintain personal interests and dignity as well as to protect their health and safely. ² RHCFs are often the only viable option for low income residents who also require some assistance in order to live independently but may not yet qualify for nursing home care and cannot afford assisted living. This population includes older adults and those with chronic, though manageable, mental illnesses. ³

³ Heading Toward Homelessness: Issues in Residential Health Care Facilities, Department of the Public Advocate, Division of Elder Advocacy, Division of Mental Health Advocacy. March, 2008
Both of these housing options are publicly regulated and funded. When terms are inaccurate, when group home is used to describe an RHCF, it can serve to confuse the public discourse, where public opinion is formed. Because public opinion is closely linked to and influences policy making and funding, it is imperative that the information be accurate. Citizens must fully understand what is being discussed so that they may determine correctly the type and level of support required for these housing options by state and local government.

The lack of safe, affordable housing in New Jersey has been well documented and presents a serious challenge to a large segment of New Jersey’s population. It is, therefore, essential to recognize both group homes for individuals with developmental disabilities and RHCFs as critically important resources which address different challenges, needs and goals.