



National Council on Severe Autism
New Jersey Chapter

Cameras in Group Homes for People with Disabilities

Protecting Residents with Developmental Disabilities and Severe Autism

A Policy White Paper

National Council on Severe Autism – NJ Chapter (NCSA-NJ)

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Why Cameras Belong in Disability Group Homes

People with severe autism and other developmental disabilities living in New Jersey group homes are among the most vulnerable members of our society — and among the least protected by existing state law. Many cannot speak, cannot identify their abusers, and cannot participate in investigations. When abuse occurs, a camera is often the only witness available.

A joint report by HHS OIG, ACL, and the Department of Justice found that up to 99 percent of critical incidents in group homes — abuse, neglect, and exploitation — were never reported to appropriate authorities.¹ High caregiver turnover, minimal overnight supervision, and the communication barriers that prevent many residents from reporting mistreatment create the conditions for systematic, unpunished abuse. Cameras directly address this gap.

Billy Cray was a young New Jersey man with severe autism who died in 2017 — found unresponsive in a closet in his bedroom at a group home. Nearly ten years later, New Jersey still has not passed a camera law. NJ S1172/A2705, the Billy Cray Act, is named in his memory. It remains pending. The delay is not a policy disagreement. It is a failure to act.

New Jersey Cameras Aid the Prosecution of Abusers

In setting after setting, video footage has turned cases that would have been closed as 'unsubstantiated' into criminal prosecutions:

- New York, 2024–2025 — Anderson Center for Autism: A whistleblower's video of a caregiver assaulting a non-verbal autistic teenager produced a criminal conviction and a second staff member charged in 2025. Neither prosecution would have been possible without footage.²
- New York City, 2022 — Queens Disability Group Home: Video documented the assault and mistreatment of a non-verbal resident. Three workers were criminally charged; attorneys confirmed footage was the only available evidence.³
- Florida, 2019 — Mount Dora Group Home: Facility surveillance showed four caregivers beating and standing on the head of a resident with developmental disabilities. All four were charged with aggravated abuse of a disabled adult.⁴
- New York — Attorney General Program: Cameras in residential care facilities produced 26 convictions of caregivers and operators; Ohio's similar program shut down at least one disability residential facility.⁵

"With no cameras, the allegations are always 'unfounded.' At least with proof, the staff can be fired and charged." — Family member of a non-verbal resident, New York disability group home

Cameras Deter Abuse in New Jersey Group Homes

A 40-year systematic review by the U.S. Office of Justice Programs found camera systems consistently reduce crime — with especially strong effects in residential settings.⁶ Studies in New Jersey documented a 50 percent drop in all crime types following camera installation.⁷ Abusers in disability group homes rely on the victim's inability to report. Cameras remove that calculated impunity.

The AARP has stated cameras 'help deter abuse and identify care improvement opportunities.'⁸ Former NY AG Cuomo put it directly: 'Homes should assume there is a camera in the room.'⁹ Cameras also protect innocent staff by providing objective documentation when behavioral incidents are mischaracterized.

Why NJ's Camera Law Must Include Audio

Verbal abuse, threats, and psychological mistreatment leave no visual trace — making audio capability critical, not optional. New Jersey is a one-party consent state, so audio recording by or on behalf of a resident is generally lawful here, though legal complexity varies in the 15 all-party-consent states.¹⁹ New York's pending S3715 already explicitly requires audio in group home common areas; NCSA-NJ supports the same standard for New Jersey.^{16,20}

Good New Jersey Managers Welcome Cameras

Responsible group home administrators increasingly view cameras as a management asset, not a threat. A group home supervisor acknowledged understanding cameras 'on a management level' because they show 'what is going on in the program' — extending oversight to the shifts when abuse is most likely.¹⁰ Massachusetts' Disabled Persons Protection Commission supported camera installation, stating simply: 'cameras protect the innocent.'¹⁰ Maryland's DDA documented that some licensed providers had already installed cameras of their own accord to improve staff monitoring.¹¹ Cameras also protect good caregivers from false accusations — the National Long-Term Care Ombudsman Resource Center notes cameras 'act as an incentive for facility staff to treat residents with dignity and respect.'

Privacy Concerns Are Theoretical — The Record Is Clear

The most common objection to cameras is privacy. It is a legitimate value — and a largely theoretical concern. After years of camera operation across multiple states, there is no documented pattern of authorized camera footage from disability group homes being misused, leaked, or weaponized against residents.

THE NEW JERSEY RECORD: The New Jersey Long-Term Care Ombudsman — which oversees the state's Safe Care Cam program and handles complaints about care facility monitoring — did not receive a single complaint over eight-plus years regarding camera footage from group homes or care facilities being used inappropriately, shared without authorization, or misused for nefarious purposes. In a program active since 2017, the privacy violations that critics predicted have simply not materialized.

Nationally, there is no documented case of authorized care facility footage being leaked or used against a resident. The one footage-sharing case on record — Florida care workers who filmed themselves abusing a patient on Snapchat — ended in arrests, making it an argument for cameras.¹² Privacy protection means designing proper frameworks — consent requirements, access controls, and real penalties for misuse — not prohibiting cameras altogether. That framework already exists. What is missing is the mandate to use it.

The Right to a Camera in Your Own Private Space

The logic is simple: If a person can legally install a camera in their own home to protect themselves, they should be able to do the same in the home where they live — even if that home is a licensed group home. A group home is not a public institution. For the resident, it is their home. Their bedroom is their private space. Stripping a resident of the right to monitor their own room inverts the power relationship between resident and provider in a way that no privacy principle can justify.

Courts agree. The Georgia Supreme Court's 2020 ruling held that a family member's hidden camera in a nursing home room was legally placed — because the resident's occupancy right included the right to monitor their own living space.¹³ Rhode Island enacted a Resident Rights Camera Law effective January 30, 2025, giving residents an explicit statutory right to a security camera in their own room — with roommate consent and written notice, but no facility veto.¹⁴

Common-area cameras protect residents where group activities occur. But a significant portion of abuse — particularly physical abuse during personal care routines and sexual abuse — occurs in private spaces. Billy Cray died in a closet in his own bedroom. A camera in that space might have told his family what happened. For families of non-verbal New Jersey residents who cannot report what happens during overnight care, the inability to monitor a loved one’s own bedroom is not a privacy protection — it is a protection gap. NJ S1172 as currently drafted addresses only common areas. NCSA-NJ urges the New Jersey Legislature to introduce companion legislation creating an explicit, non-waivable resident right to cameras in private spaces, modeled on Rhode Island’s 2025 Resident Rights Camera Law.

How New Jersey Compares: 20+ States Have Already Acted

New Jersey lags far behind its peers. More than 20 states have already enacted laws or programs permitting cameras in residential care settings while NJ’s legislation has stalled for years. The most relevant comparisons for New Jersey lawmakers:

State / Bill	Scope	Key Feature
NJ S1172/A2705 (pending)	Disability group homes — DDD Tier C+	Video-only; \$5,000–\$10,000 facility penalty; explicit grandfather clause
NY S3715 (pending)	OPWDD group homes, day programs, residential schools	Cameras with audio required in all common areas
Illinois (210 ILCS 32)	DD facilities and CILAs — expressly covers disability group homes	Audio and video with consent; obstruction = Class B misdemeanor; retaliation = \$10,000 fine
Florida (APD Rules)	Group homes for persons with developmental disabilities	Video monitoring authorized; APD may revoke right for violations
Massachusetts (DDS 2025)	DDS-contracted disability group homes	Video only; audio strictly prohibited; existing cameras must comply within 90 days
Rhode Island (Eff. 1/30/25)	Nursing homes and assisted living residences	Explicit resident right to camera in own room; facility cannot veto
Texas, Oklahoma, Missouri	Nursing homes / LTC — strong precedent for disability settings	Authorized monitoring with consent; anti-retaliation; anti-tampering provisions

NJ Group Homes Can Easily Afford Cameras

Camera system prices have dropped by more than 80 percent over the past decade — and this cost is negligible compared to what New Jersey Medicaid pays group homes to care for our most vulnerable residents.^{17,18} The cost objection is not serious.

Recommendations

For State Legislators

- Pass NJ S1172/A2705 — the Billy Cray Act — with implementing regulations that include a sunset on the grandfather exemption. New Jersey has waited nearly ten years since Billy's death. There is no valid reason to wait longer.
- Introduce companion legislation creating an explicit, non-waivable resident right to cameras in private bedrooms, modeled on Rhode Island's 2025 law.
- Urge New Jersey to adopt an audio-inclusive standard and advance NY S3715 as a model.

For Residential Providers

- Do not wait for a mandate. Install cameras in common areas proactively with written policy covering consent, signage, video-only defaults, and access controls.
- Honor resident and family requests for cameras in private rooms as a baseline expectation, not a negotiation.
- Use footage for staff training and incident review — not merely as a reactive response to suspected abuse.

For Advocates and Families

- Demand that any camera legislation contain explicit criminal and administrative penalties for obstruction and tampering — without enforcement, a camera law is a paper protection.
- Demand an explicit private room camera right in any bill that reaches the floor.
- Utilize New Jersey's Safe Care Cam lending program when abuse or neglect is suspected.

Conclusion

The evidence is compelling and consistent across years of operation in multiple states: cameras aid prosecution, deter abuse, and are welcomed by responsible managers. The feared privacy violations have not materialized — the NJ Ombudsman received zero complaints about footage misuse over eight-plus years. Residents also have the same right as any homeowner to monitor their own private space, and that right must be codified in legislation alongside common-area requirements.

People with severe autism living in group homes cannot speak for themselves when they are hurt. They cannot identify their abusers. They cannot participate in investigations. A camera is not an intrusion into their life. It may be the only protection they will ever have.

About NCSA-NJ

There are 67,000 people in New Jersey with severe autism. The New Jersey Chapter of the National Council on Severe Autism is working to improve their lives, ensure their safety, and protect their futures through policy and legislation advocacy. Learn more and follow our NJ legislative priorities at [NCSA-NJ.org](https://ncsa-nj.org) — including cameras in disability group homes (A2705/S1172), independent abuse investigation (A6137/S4996), and direct care funding (A6138/S4997). Contact: info@ncsa-nj.org | 1070 NJ-34, Suite #530, Matawan, NJ 07747

End Notes

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