

# NJ advocates want stronger state oversight, better investigations of group homes

*6-minute read*

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## Key Points AI-assisted summary ⓘ

- The NorthJersey.com investigative series Hidden at Home exposed abuse, neglect, and deaths within the group home system.
  - Speakers at the session highlighted the lack of accountability and transparency, including inadequate investigations and a lack of consequences for providers.
  - The Department of Human Services is supporting bills to implement fines for group homes and study the current investigation system.
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Stronger government oversight, more robust consequences, cameras in common spaces and a rehailed investigation process were among the many ideas floated at a virtual listening session on reforming New Jersey's group home system serving individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

The June 30 event — hosted by the New Jersey Council on Developmental Disabilities, the Regional Family Support Planning Councils and the state ombudsman — was organized in response to NorthJersey.com's investigative series Hidden at Home, which highlighted abuse, neglect and deaths in the \$1.5 billion group home system — and a lack of state action.

"The three of our organizations got together and thought, 'How can we take this conversation forward?' Now seems to be an opportunity, [a] real call to action," said Paul Aronsohn, the state ombudsman for individuals with intellectual or developmental disabilities and their families.

"This is not a simple conversation that has a quick fix," said Mercedes Witowsky, executive director of the New Jersey Council on Developmental Disabilities. "Changing systems unfortunately does not happen as quickly as we would like it to, and at the same time, lives are impacted every single day."

Hidden at Home detailed [avoidable deaths of residents](#) under group home care and a [failure to meet basic needs](#). It showed how some residents are left unsupervised, can suffer from malnutrition, aren't kept clean and are not given their medications.

The majority of allegations about unsafe conditions or abuse, neglect and exploitation are [investigated by group home companies themselves](#). The state agency that oversees the system, the Department of Human Services, rarely uses punishment tools at its disposal, such as issuing shorter licenses, suspending admissions or shuttering homes.

## **'Wow, that's not even close to what happened'**

Speakers lamented a lack of accountability and transparency, with unknown injuries occurring without explanation and nobody taking responsibility.

"It seems as though, both from leadership and for the [direct support professionals], if you say you don't know, there's nothing more that you could do, and it is intensely frustrating," said Kate De Luca, who said her sister-in-law had suffered abuse and neglect.

"When we were asking about things, 'Why is there a bruise in the shape of a handprint?' 'I don't know.' 'Where are her personal items?' 'I don't know.' 'Why is this happening?' 'I don't know,'" De Luca said.

Vincent Giardina, the former head of investigations for the state, now consults for group home providers. He advises them on how to reduce abuse and neglect and helps conduct internal investigations. What he views on cameras can be very different from what is reported, he said.

"I can't tell you how many times I've worked on an investigation especially as a consultant ... something that's reported initially is innocuous or a fall ... and then someone is able to look at the cameras, and say, 'Wow that's not even close to what happened,'" Giardina said.

“This injury occurred because this person was punched,” he said. “And in the background, someone is sleeping on the recliner, and another staff member — they’ve gone missing for four hours in a van somewhere.”

In addition to cameras, Giardina advocated for the use of electronic systems to replace paper tracking for medication records. [The NorthJersey.com series found that group homes](#) can fail to properly administer medication, such as giving too much or too little, or failing entirely to administer the medication. Residents were hospitalized and even died.

## **Complaints about lack of state response**

The conversation repeatedly turned to the lack of consequences and state action.

“There is zero action that follows,” said Yana Mermel, who testified in front of the Legislature about abuse and neglect her daughter suffered in a group home.

“That needs to be changed from the top down,” Mermel said. “We need to hold those in charge responsible. We need to hold DHS responsible. There are no repercussions, not in licensing, and certainly not in any sort of penalties, because where we stand right now, there are no penalties.”

The Department of Human Services is pushing for a package of bills that would enact first-ever fines on group home companies, as well as study the investigations system and cap executive pay and other spending by providers.

The bills are currently in legislative committees.

Lisa Smith, support coordinator supervisor for Family Care of New Jersey, said, “When there’s an incident, no one seems to do anything.”

## **Push to overhaul investigations**

The New Jersey chapter of the National Council on Severe Autism and a parent advocate group are pushing for an overhaul of investigations into abuse, neglect and deaths, whether through a third-party entity like the one New York has, or a dedicated office within the Attorney General’s Office.

Laura Kelly said that even when multiple investigations into harm against her daughter under group home care were substantiated, it “didn’t make any difference.” She said the state can turn cases over to the Attorney General’s Office, but doesn’t appear to.

“If we could get the Attorney General’s Office to take this a bit more seriously, then maybe agencies will realize that somebody now is looking over their shoulders and they can be held criminally liable, and maybe they’ll step it up,” Kelly said.

The relationship between the Department of Human Services and law enforcement creates a catch-22 situation, said Jill Hoegel, the director of investigations at Disability Rights New Jersey, the state’s protection and advocacy agency.

“The licensing agency or the investigative unit doesn’t step in to do anything, because it’s in the hands of law enforcement, and law enforcement doesn’t really do anything with the allegation, and so kind of sits there until sometimes it’s just too late,” Hoegel said in an interview with NorthJersey.com.

“I’ve very rarely seen the police involvement or criminal prosecution of either an individual staff person or an agency,” she said.

Disability Rights New Jersey, which is tasked under federal law with advocating for the rights of people with disabilities, issued a press release in the wake of the Hidden at Home series that said, “This current situation is dire and inexcusable.”

“There are no excuses for individuals who require this level of care to be subjected to abuse, neglect, sub-standard care, or at risk of serious harm or death,” the statement said.

The organization called for greater transparency into data on investigations, licensing inspections and other safety metrics so families and individuals with disabilities can make informed decisions when searching for a place to live.

Dorothy Blakeslee, the chair of the Statewide Regional Family Support Planning Council, said her daughter’s group home staff are transparent and open. They show Blakeslee her daughter’s medication records to verify she received her prescriptions, for example.

“That kind of open communication is something that all agencies should have — that is a best practice,” Blakeslee said. “That makes me feel that I have a little more confidence in what they can do.”

## **'Committed to continuous improvement'**

The head of the state agency responsible for group homes, Human Services Commissioner Sarah Adelman, had little new to say publicly in reaction to Hidden at Home.

When lawmakers asked about the series during budget hearings, Adelman said, “We’ve made significant strides to make the system work as best as it can.”

She pointed to the implementation of the Stephen Komninos’ Law, which added two surprise visits each year to every home to root out abuse and neglect. It also increased wages for direct support professionals, which now average \$21.37 an hour.

When NorthJersey.com interviewed Adelman for the series, she insisted the department takes “aggressive steps” against providers and asked, “Are you under the impression that there are systemic, egregious issues happening in provider agencies where we should have intervened and didn't? Where does the assumption come from that what we're doing is not enough?”

During the same interview, when asked about the many instances when guardians told NorthJersey.com that residents’ basic needs were not being met — such as adequate staffing, food and medication — Adelman said that was “not a complaint I have ever received directly.”

The department did not respond to a request for comment about the listening session.

Jonathan Seifried, commissioner of the Division of Developmental Disabilities, called the series “heartbreaking,” during a May public meeting.

“There's always more to do, and the experiences of the families who share their stories in the NorthJersey.com articles demonstrate that,” Seifried said.

He highlighted the same changes as Adelman and added, “We remain committed to continuous improvement and will continue to listen to individuals with disabilities and their families.”

At the June 30 listening session, meanwhile, speakers repeatedly noted the difficulty in finding a group home company they can trust, since hardworking, competent workers often leave because the wage is too low or they face burnout — and the staff can completely change a resident’s experience.

“We also have noticed tremendous variability across homes, so there’s no such thing, quite honestly, as a good agency,” De Luca said. “There are good homes. So that also makes things very hard to evaluate, because depending on the people in a local environment, the quality of care can change.”