

NJ's disability watchdog warns that next governor will inherit group home system in crisis



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Key Points

In his latest annual report, New Jersey's disability ombudsman said neglect, abuse and unsafe conditions persist at group homes.

Paul Aronsohn's report describes a bureaucracy that often treats families as adversaries rather than partners as they try to seek better care.

New Jersey's disability ombudsman released yet another blistering report Monday on [failures in the state's group homes](#), highlighting stories of widespread neglect and unchecked abuse — and calling out a system that he said protects itself while failing thousands of vulnerable residents.

“Not a single day goes by without someone contacting us about an allegation of abuse and neglect,” Paul Aronsohn warned on July 7 in the [79-page report](#). “Sometimes it is about a new, terrible experience. Often it is about an ongoing situation.”

Aronsohn, a state-appointed watchdog known officially as the ombudsman for individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities and their families, framed his annual report as a warning to the new governor set to take office in January, who will inherit a system that spends nearly \$3 billion to fund care at privately run group homes.

"Simply stated, we have a full-blown crisis on our hands — one that is taking an increasing toll on all involved in terms of human and financial costs," wrote Aronsohn, a former Ridgewood mayor appointed by Gov. Phil Murphy in 2018. He acknowledged that the report could be his last, with Murphy's administration due to close at the end of this year.

The report cites numerous complaints his office has received over the past year:

A resident diagnosed with malnutrition. The walls of a youth group home scarred with holes; its main entrance reachable only by a crumbling set of stairs. Medication left unsecured on a patio table at another facility, with more drugs found on the seat of a transport van.

The findings mirror reports by NorthJersey.com and The Record in [recent years](#), including an investigative series this spring, [Hidden at Home](#), which highlighted abuse, neglect and deaths in the group home system and a failure by the state to punish violations. Advocates have called for stronger government oversight, more robust consequences and an independent agency to investigate complaints, among other reforms.

Medication errors are so common that families, the report says, have grown used to them. Citing a finding from the Hidden at Home series, Aronsohn noted there have been [1,620 confirmed instances](#) of residents' drugs going missing or being administered incorrectly in the last five years alone — an average of more than six errors a week.

Many incidents likely go unreported, the ombudsman added, because loved ones no longer see the point or fear repercussions from group-home operators.

Who investigates NJ group homes?

Aronsohn's report describes a bureaucracy that often treats families as adversaries rather than partners. It is also a system flush with public dollars, he said. The budget for the state's Community Care Program, the primary [Medicaid](#)-funded system for adults with developmental disabilities, has ballooned to nearly \$3 billion — a tripling since 2017. But the number of people served has risen just 21% in that same time, Aronsohn said.

About two-thirds of that funding goes to private providers that run group homes and supervised apartments. Many of those operators receive between \$250,000 and \$500,000 a year for each person in their care, the report says.

But there is little transparency about how money is spent, Aronsohn said, and even less accountability when something goes wrong.

Nearly 70% of all deaths in group homes are classified as “unexpected.” But even then, the state does not automatically investigate. Most inquiries, the report says, are carried out by the same provider agencies accused of wrongdoing.

“We know abuse and neglect are under-reported. We know there are serious questions about the quality of the investigations, process as well as substance,” Aronsohn said. “We know most investigations are conducted by the provider agencies themselves and that, in the end, most allegations against them are ‘unsubstantiated.’”

Unlike hospitals and nursing homes, group home providers in New Jersey face no civil penalties when they violate rules meant to protect residents, he wrote.

Meanwhile, workers who provide daily, hands-on care are often paid wages comparable to those of entry-level retail jobs. Job listings reviewed in the report offered as little as \$19.50 an hour for direct support professionals, as the workers are called. Low pay and minimal training lead to high staff turnover, Aronsohn said.

“Twenty dollars an hour to do really difficult work is not enough, and that is not just physically difficult, but emotionally difficult,” he said in an interview Monday. “The work of a direct support professional is so important and can be very challenging. We still do not compensate direct support professionals as we should.”

Aronsohn's report offers a familiar set of recommendations — many of them proposed in previous reports but never enacted. He called for independent investigations of abuse and neglect, mandatory reviews of every group home death, civil penalties for violations, cameras in common areas and better wages for the home aides.

Real change will also require leaders at state agencies with real-life experience, he said.

“Whoever becomes governor,” he said, “we need people with lived disability experience — people with disabilities, family members of people with disabilities. We need them. They should not just be in the room at the table — they should be driving the conversation.

"Just as the division of Veterans Affairs should be led by a veteran and the Division on Women should be led by a woman, the next governor should make sure that offices making disability policy are led and largely staffed by people with lived disability experience," Aronsohn said. "This would make a big, important difference. It would help mitigate, if not eliminate, the disconnect that often exists between those making policies and those impacted by those policies."

Murphy administration responds

In a statement, Tom Hester, a spokesman for the state Department of Human Services, said New Jersey has made "historic investments" in the workforce, raising wages for direct support professionals from \$12.66 an hour to \$21.37 under the Murphy administration.

He said the department treats abuse and neglect with "the utmost seriousness," citing more than 1,300 incidents investigated, 22,000 unannounced site visits, 80,000 face-to-face visits across 2,200 settings, and 283 individuals placed on a Central Registry, which bars them from working in these settings.

Nonetheless, Hester said, the administration acknowledges that "more must be done" and supports a series of reforms proposed in the Legislature. He said they include:

- Financial penalties for providers who fail safety and quality standards.
- Authority to end payments to noncompliant providers.
- Stronger governance and service standards.
- A new director of medical services for deeper investigations.
- A Disability Mortality and Abuse Prevention Advisory Committee.
- A stronger investigation process.
- An annual workforce survey to guide people-centered policy.

