

EDITORIAL

Will next governor fix group home crisis?

Crucial steps need leader's attention

Assemblyman, Congresswoman — as we wrote last month, we hope you are paying attention.

New Jersey's group homes for people living with disabilities need critical attention.

Paul Aronsohn, the state ombudsman for individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities and their families, released a new and blistering report last week, highlighting the abuse and neglect chronicled at length in *Hidden at Home*, the special investigative series reported by staff writers Ashley Balcerzak and Jean Rimbach and published by NorthJersey.com and The Record in May.

The two candidates vying to be our next governor — former Assemblyman Jack Ciattarelli and U.S. Rep. Mikie Sherrill — need to read it.

Aronsohn, as staff writer Gene Myers reported last week, raised a significant alarm about a system that he said routinely fails thousands of vulnerable Garden State residents.

"Not a single day goes by without someone contacting us about an allegation of abuse and neglect," Aronsohn, a former Ridgewood mayor, warned in the 79-page report released July 7. "Sometimes it is about a new, terrible experience. Often it is about an ongoing situation."

Whoever emerges as the victor in November's contest for governor must heed the warnings Aronsohn has issued — and must lead the change we've already called for. New Jersey's next governor simply must be an advocate for people with disabilities. New Jersey's next governor must address the failures of our group homes.

Aronsohn, first appointed by Gov. Phil Murphy in 2018, makes a strong case: New Jersey taxpayers invest \$3 billion to fund care at Garden State group homes. That represents a 200% increase in funding since Murphy took office, and yet, Aronsohn noted, enrollment in group homes has risen just 21% in that time, raising serious questions about how effectively the money is being spent.

The next governor must take accountability for that investment — and deliver.

In just the last year, Aronsohn said, his office has received numerous complaints about conditions in New Jersey group homes, including:

- A resident diagnosed with malnu-



ILLUSTRATION: TAKÉ UDA/USA TODAY NETWORK; PHOTO: MICHAEL KARAS/NORTHJERSEY.COM

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- The walls of a group home housing youths scarred with holes, and its main entrance reachable only by a set of crumbling stairs.

- Medication left unsecured on a patio table.

These findings mirror those found in *Hidden at Home* — and come despite the considerable investments made with public dollars in New Jersey's group homes for people with disabilities.

That \$3 billion figure — which funds the New Jersey Community Care Program, the primary Medicaid-driven system for developmental disabilities — has tripled since 2017. It fuels a system with little accountability: Unlike hospitals and nursing homes, group homes face no civil penalties when they violate rules that are intended to protect residents, Aronsohn underscored.

That's a troubling situation, Assemblyman and Congresswoman, when providers receive between \$250,000 and \$500,000 per patient per year to provide care. It's equally troubling when you consider that there have been 1,620 confirmed instances of residents' drugs either going missing or being administered incorrectly over the last five years. It's even more troubling when you consider that nearly 70% of all deaths in New Jersey group homes are classified as unexpected. And it's unacceptable that state regulations do not automatically trigger investigations into those deaths.

Aronsohn, chillingly, believes that these statistics do not begin to paint an accurate picture of the dire state of our group homes.

"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.'"

What can make a difference for New Jersey's group homes?

Aronsohn's report offers recommendations that have been echoed by advocates in our reporting for *Hidden at Home*:

- He calls for independent investigations of neglect and abuse.
- He seeks mandatory reviews of every group home death.
- He suggests civil penalties for providers who are proved to be in violation of state regulations.
- He wants cameras in common areas in New Jersey group homes.
- He said group home staff members need better wages.

All of these recommendations feel broadly tangible to us — and require leadership in Trenton: From the next governor to the Legislature to officials at the state Department of Human Services.

Change in New Jersey has to start at the top, Aronsohn said. We couldn't agree more.

"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."

Before the June 10 gubernatorial primary, we spoke with both Ciattarelli, the Republican nominee, and Sherrill, the Democratic nominee, about *Hidden at Home* and its findings. Both pledged action. It's sorely needed.

New Jersey's most vulnerable residents should not live in fear — or in peril. New Jersey's taxpayers should not be shoveling billions into a broken, unaccountable system.

Assemblyman, Congresswoman — again, we hope you are paying attention.