



# HEALING HOMES

A ROAD TO RECOVERY  
FOR NEW JERSEY YOUTH



[www.childadvocate.nj.gov](http://www.childadvocate.nj.gov)

NEW JERSEY OFFICE OF THE  
**CHILD ADVOCATE**

*Promoting Positive Change for Children*

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## BECAUSE EVERY CHILD DESERVES A BACKYARD

*“They helped me a lot. Without a group home, where would I be? I have a roof over my head and food and all that other stuff. I’d probably still be in the shelter. I appreciate the group homes that we have.”*

– Shaniqua, 18, who is working toward becoming a nurse

ON ANY GIVEN DAY, HUNDREDS OF NEW JERSEY CHILDREN LIVE IN SPECIAL HOMES WHERE THEY WORK TO REBUILD THEIR YOUNG LIVES. SOME STRUGGLE TO OVERCOME MENTAL HEALTH NEEDS AND MASTER THE COPING SKILLS NEEDED TO LEAD A PRODUCTIVE LIFE. OTHERS ARE LEARNING TO FEEL SAFE AGAIN AFTER BEING ABUSED OR NEGLECTED. STILL OTHER YOUTH ARE ENTERING ADULTHOOD, AND ARE STRIVING TO FORGE CLOSE COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS WITH CARING ADULTS.

Unlike the impersonal, isolated environment of institutions, these healing homes give children and youth a safe place where they can heal and live more normally. Like any other child, these kids attend school, get part-time jobs, play sports, participate in community events and shop at the mall.

These healing homes often keep children closer to their families, their neighborhoods and their school. Maintaining these connections can be a vital part of their recovery. In these homes, children are part of their communities, not locked away in an institution.

That’s something we can all understand. Because every child, whether from New Jersey’s cities, suburbs or rural areas, deserves a community to call her own, a place that feels like her own backyard.

*This South Jersey home serves youth who need help making the transition to adulthood.*



## MEETING THE NEEDS

The vast majority of New Jersey children with mental health needs remain at home, often receiving intensive services. Some families, however, need help in meeting the needs of a child with mental health issues. Other children in our community simply lack the family supports they require.

And so, these healing homes form a critical piece of the broad spectrum of treatment options for children who have suffered trauma and/or struggle with mental health needs. Without them, many more New Jersey children would be sent out of state, far from the familiar surroundings of home.

The New Jersey Department of Children and Families is working to fortify both in-home services and out-of-home treatment options, building the state's capacity to provide effective treatment for all children.

Healing homes, which serve up to 12 children, are closely supervised and must meet stringent state regulations. With low staff-to-child ratios, these homes provide close, around-the-clock supervision of the youth who reside in them. In addition, a body of research that includes 47 studies from 1973 to 1993 offers strong evidence that these homes have no affect on property values.<sup>1 2</sup> And, both state and federal laws protect the residents of these homes from housing discrimination.<sup>3 4</sup>

Unfortunately, some communities, often out of misunderstanding, react with fear and suspicion when a healing home first comes to town. Some towns have threatened or have taken legal action to keep these homes from opening in their borders. Others have expressed concerns that these homes will depress property values.

The truth is, hundreds of healing homes already exist in towns around New Jersey where they peacefully and productively have become part of the fabric of their communities, while doing the vital work of shepherding children along their roads to recovery.

The Office of the Child Advocate is an independent state agency dedicated to promoting positive change for all New Jersey children, especially those with the greatest need. Our **Healing Homes** campaign encourages local/state partnerships to support New Jersey's children and youth, provides information to debunk myths about youth homes and expands understanding of the importance of this vital service for thousands of New Jersey children.

We encourage residents and local officials in towns around the state to embrace these programs and recognize that in strengthening our children, we strengthen our towns, our communities, our state and our future.

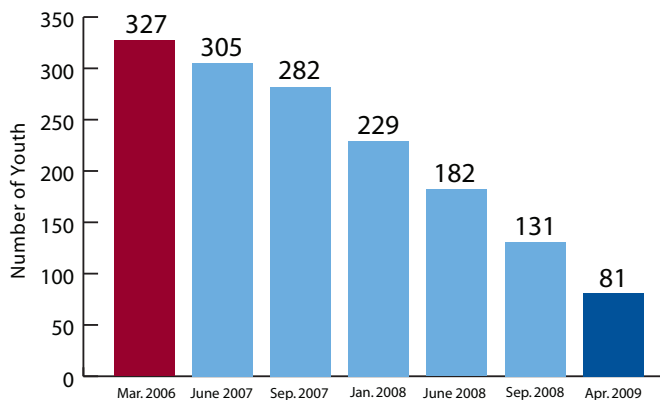
*"There was never any problem with the youth. They were well maintained. They were always with staff. They worked with the community organizations doing projects with the community. They're just a part of the community. They're our kids."*

– Shelia Roberts, group home neighbor



## Authorized Out-of-State Placements\*

Number of youth in out-of-state placements at the first of the month



Source: NJ Department of Children and Families

## WHAT ARE HEALING HOMES?

Although there are many types of group homes, these healing homes are contracted through the Department of Children and Families and provide around-the-clock care for 12 or fewer children. Most homes serve about six youth. These homes must meet stringent state regulations governing maintenance, community relations and safety. Children living in these residences are never to be left home alone. The homes are regularly inspected. Inspection reports are available to the public through the Department of Children and Families' Office of Licensing.

## WHY DO WE NEED HEALING HOMES?

One fifth of the children in the United States have been diagnosed with a mental health need.<sup>5</sup> From a therapeutic perspective, it is best when these children can remain with their own families and receive appropriate treatment and supports. Unfortunately, that is not always possible. Some families need help managing the challenges of a child with mental health needs. Other children lack the family supports they need.

In 2006, more than 300 New Jersey children were, on any given day, living in out-of-state treatment facilities because New Jersey lacked appropriate programs to treat these children closer to home. By April 2009, that number had been reduced to 81.

This is real progress. And it is in large part due to the state's efforts to expand community treatment options – and the willingness of many towns to embrace these programs.

Strengthening the full spectrum of care – in-home services and community-based day and residential programs – benefits communities across the state. When children and families receive effective supports and treatment, they are more likely to grow into healthy, productive adults who contribute to their families, their communities and our overall economy and social structure.

\*Placements made through the Division of Child Behavioral Health Services.



## “WE WELCOME THEM WITH OPEN ARMS”

Marcus didn't think he would see his 19th birthday.



Marcus, 19

“I got in a lot of trouble,” Marcus remembers. “I thought I wasn't going to be here to see my 19th birthday. That's how rough it was.”

Now, Marcus considers himself a success story. At 19, he has graduated from high school and is planning to attend college. The South Jersey youth credits his healing home with helping turn his life around.

“The home not only ‘put a roof over my head,’ but also helped me to become a better man,” he says.

Prior to coming to the group home, Marcus lived with his family, but problems arose that made it impossible for him to continue living there. Since coming to the group home, he has been able to rebuild his relationship with his family. Although he says he is too old to return home, he wants to eventually get his own apartment and stay close to his family.

Marcus is one of many youth around the state who live in these healing homes, which are designed to help youth who are homeless, have behavioral or mental issues and who cannot live at home with their families. They are given a second chance to succeed in their communities.

The agency that operates this particular home, located in Southern New Jersey, is one of many group home operators around the state providing this critical service – one important piece of a broad spectrum of treatments for at-risk youth.

In developing several youth group homes in one neighborhood, this agency transformed the landscape of the community in more ways than one. What was once a row of dilapidated, run-down and garbage-strewn row houses is now a beautiful city block of shining homes. Not only did the renovation of these homes revitalize the neighborhood, it brought hopeful youth who are now part of the community.

“They're wonderful neighbors,” says Shelia, a lifetime resident of the neighborhood and president of the local civic association. “These programs do benefit a neighborhood.”

Despite the positive impact the homes have had on the children and the community, it was not an easy feat to get there. Initial community opposition to one of the programs was based on the misperception that the youth would be detrimental to the community.

“Anytime you move into a community, there's always some hesitation about who's coming into the community,” says one of the group home directors. “Once the neighbors learn about the program and meet the clients, they usually warm up. Everybody needs to understand each other. Once you understand each other, you can work together.”



Wesley, 18, attends the unveiling of the mosaic that he and other youth helped to create.

And work together they did. In time, as the agency and the youth became intertwined with the community, initial opposition faded. Shelia and other neighbors now know the youth and agency staff well, often working side-by-side at community events, such as neighborhood clean-ups, holiday drives and church functions.

One of the most creative projects came when youth from the group home worked all summer with a community program to create a stunning mosaic that now graces a county administrative building. The youth worked tediously for weeks, piecing together small slices of colored tiles to form a work of art that reflects the community in which they live. As the children worked, passersby would cheer them on, serving up support for their hard work and efforts to make the building beautiful.

Like all healing homes, this program is required to provide 24-hour supervision and strives to give the children the skills and support they need to transition out of the program, either going home to their families or out on their own. Much emphasis is placed on ensuring that the facility and programs are as “home-like” as possible for the youth. Residents' rooms are neat, dorm-like and scattered with personal belongings – a far cry from what life would look like in an institution.

Shaniqua, an 18-year-old group home resident, likes that homey feel. “Without a group home, then where would I be at?” she wonders. “I'd probably still be in a shelter. I appreciate the group homes we have.”

Shaniqua had been living with her grandmother but could no longer remain there, so she was placed in a youth shelter. After that, she was sent to live in a South Jersey residential treatment center where Shaniqua felt more isolated. “We were stuck in the woods. Here, we live in the community.”

After progressing through the steps of that first program, she was placed in the group home, which she credits with improving her ability to react to everyday events more positively. She says she just copes better.

Shaniqua will graduate from high school in the spring and plans to attend community college and then transfer to a 4-year school where she can study nursing or business. In effect, the group home has created a stable support system for her, which she would not have otherwise had. “I love our staff. I love each and every last one of them. They're always here for us,” she says.

Wesley, a warm and well-spoken 18-year-old, also liked the camaraderie of the other youth in the home. He enjoyed the structure of the day, which began at 7 a.m. with breakfast, followed by school, some recreational activities, dinner, shower and lights out at 9 p.m. Wesley says the group home has benefited his life in many different ways.

“It has helped me become more organized. It taught me discipline. I learned that certain things won’t always go your way,” Wesley says, recalling how he often used the weight room in the basement as a way to relieve stress. “When things don’t go your way, you can’t go crazy and explode. You have to let it go and keep moving on.”

Wesley’s experience at the group home helped to motivate him. He progressed through the program, graduated and moved home with his mother. He has learned website development through a community program and plans to attend college

where he will earn his GED and college credits at the same time. He feels that living in a community setting, close to his family, helped him to advance more quickly than if he had been farther away in a more isolated institution. “I was able to see my family. My family was able to come to visit me.”

Shelia, the president of the neighborhood civic association, has seen first-hand the progress youth make in these healing homes.

“Once you give a child a start like this, it means a whole lot,” Shelia says. “They get a taste of it and this is what they want. This makes a big difference.”

With a warm smile, Shelia best describes the relationship that has been fostered between the youth and the neighborhood. “They are part of the fabric of this community. They live here. We welcome them with open arms. They’re our kids.”

## PASSING THE BASKET: CARING NEIGHBORS HELP YOUTH REBUILD THEIR LIVES

When neighbors asked Vince Francis to sign a petition to oppose the opening of a group home next door, he hesitated. Sure, he had worries. But before acting to block a program that could help kids, he decided to gather some information.

So he met with the group home operator. The Central Jersey resident learned more about the program, the stringent state requirements that govern group homes, the around-the-clock supervision, the youth’s needs and the services the home provides to meet those needs. He refused to sign the petition.

That was 2005. Today, Vince says the youth in the home and the people who operate it are good neighbors in this quiet suburban New Jersey community. The kids, he says, are being given a solid chance to reclaim their young lives, a chance to live in a home with a backyard. And he’s happy to be part of that.

“Those kids need nice people like you to live with,” Vince says. “These kids are neighbors like any other here. People need to be open-minded. Three years have passed since they came here, without any complaints.”

For boys like Al-Taquan, the home provides both a sense of belonging and a taste of independence – things that would be hard to come by in an institutional setting.

This particular home is a residence for boys who take comfort in the warm family environment of the cozy living room, the bright clean kitchen and the sunny backyard.

“A house like this is more a home,” says Al-Taquan who has spent 19 months sharing the house and the chores with the four other youth who live there. “For a child like me, it is better to be in the community. People wave to you when you’re walking on the street. They know you. If I never came here, I probably would never experience the stuff that has made me what I am today, so I appreciate the program for that.”



The 19-year-old has worked hard to become a member of the community. He regularly volunteers at the local library. He attends charity events and assists with their planning. “It helps to help,” he says. “A lot of the neighbors are important people in my life now. I have met a lot of people” and learned many life skills too, like money management. “This learning stays with you and helps you out,” he explains.

If at the beginning the neighbors were uneasy, that has changed, says Alex, a home director for the agency that operates this and other group homes serving abused, neglected and homeless youth ages 16 to 21. Inside these homes, staff strives to help youth overcome the difficulties they face, become independent and begin to build their own lives.

“They are looking for stability, structure and a sense of belonging,” says Alex. “Here they learn how to become a part of the community.”

Staff member Cezette says that a community-based home like this helps young people in transition develop relationships with the neighbors who become a good influence in their lives. “They need to have connections, which they establish living in a house that is part of the community.”

For Vince Francis, the decision to refuse to sign the petition turned out to be the right one. Now, Vince feels that he is part of the solution.

“It’s like passing the basket around in the church on Sundays,” Vince says. “You know, you help somebody else.”

Available research on the effectiveness of group homes suggests what many of us intuitively know: children are more likely to thrive when they receive quality treatment specially designed to meet their needs, delivered by trained staff, close to home, with strong family involvement.<sup>6789</sup>

## WHO ARE THE CHILDREN IN THESE HOMES?

Many of the children and youth living in healing homes have behavioral or mental health needs. Some have suffered abuse or neglect and may have been involved in the foster care system. Some were homeless. Others have family to care for them but they need a more structured program to treat mental or emotional health issues. They range in age from five to 21 years old. Most are between 14 and 17 years old.

Some youth have been treated in more restrictive settings, such as hospitals, and have progressed in their recovery to the point where they are able to live safely in the community. Others may have been living at home or with a foster family, but now need a more intensive treatment program to address their needs.

For some youth, the goal is to return to their families. For others, the goal is to find a permanent home with relatives or an adoptive family. Still others are older and mapping out a plan for their future, whether it's attending college or getting a job.

## WHAT SERVICES DO HEALING HOMES PROVIDE?

Healing homes offer a variety of services to children in need. Generally, youth receive food, clothing, therapy, health care, education and recreation programs. Services are designed to build youth's self-esteem, improve academic performance and help them cope with the everyday stresses of life. Ultimately, the programs strive to give youth the skills they need to succeed in school and in life.

These structured programs generally provide a full spectrum of services, including:

- Individual, group and family therapy
- Behavior modification
- Individual educational programs and tutoring, sometimes provided in the homes
- Vocational training
- Training in skills needed to live independently
- Music, art and recreational therapy

Before being admitted to one of these homes, state regulations require a team of doctors and other professionals to clinically evaluate each child. Youth receive a comprehensive physical and mental health assessment. This evaluation is used to match a youth to an appropriate program and to create a treatment plan tailored to meet a youth's individual needs.

A treatment team is mandated to develop and manage each child's treatment plan. This team includes medical and nursing staff, social workers, child care workers and administrators. The plan must identify specific treatment goals and the people responsible for implementing the plan. It must also establish timeframes for ensuring a youth progresses in her recovery. State regulations require the plans be reviewed every three months and revised as needed.

## WHO RUNS THESE HOMES?

The Department of Children and Families contracts with approved agencies around the state to establish and operate these homes. In hiring these agencies, the Department uses a competitive process that strives to identify the most highly qualified agencies to care for these children. State rules require that all staff pass criminal and child abuse background checks. The state also requires the homes to have at least one staff member on duty for every six or fewer children when the youth are awake and at home. At least one staff member must be on duty when youth are at school or asleep. Youth are never to be left home alone.

State rules also require these homes to have a full-time agency administrator or home director with training and education in social work or a related field and at least three years experience in the human services field. The homes are also mandated to employ qualified social service workers and child care staff members. All staff members must complete comprehensive training programs.

## WHAT IF I HAVE A COMPLAINT?

The New Jersey Department of Children and Families' Office of Licensing responds to complaints about the operation of a home. The licensing office is charged with investigating complaints and taking any necessary action to ensure that a home is in compliance with state rules. In addition, when someone reports an allegation of child abuse or neglect in a state-contracted facility, a special unit within the Department investigates the allegation. (To report suspected child abuse, call 1-877-NJABUSE).



*"My neighbors were afraid they were going to have kids with real problems in here. But when we say the kids have problems, they are not what you think they are. They're kids who need some help, who need an environment like you nice people can provide. It's like passing the basket around in the church on Sunday. Help somebody else."*

– Vince Francis, group home neighbor



## WON'T A HEALING HOME IN MY NEIGHBORHOOD HURT MY PROPERTY VALUE?

In a review of 47 studies from 1973 to 1993, researchers found that property values are unaffected by these types of homes. Other studies show that these homes have no effect on sales activity. For example, one study of property market activity around 12 Philadelphia mental health facilities concluded that no decline in sales prices occurred due to the presence of community homes.<sup>10</sup>

## HEALING HOMES DON'T PAY PROPERTY TAXES, RIGHT?

Many healing homes are operated by non-profit agencies, which are exempt from paying property taxes. However, many agencies recognize the importance of financially contributing to the communities in which they operate programs. So, some agencies opt to provide payment in lieu of taxes to a municipality. Other operators choose to financially support a valued program or service, such as the local rescue squad or the little league. These arrangements are strictly voluntary and typically arranged on a case-by-case basis.

## HAVE HEALING HOMES CAUSED PROBLEMS IN OTHER NEIGHBORHOODS?

Healing homes are, in many respects, no different than any other residence. In fact, a recent study conducted by a professor at Rutgers University's School of Social Work found that most people living near these homes were not even aware such a home existed in their neighborhood.<sup>11</sup>

Of 1,425 neighbors interviewed for this study, just 27 percent were even aware that a residence for people with psychiatric problems was located in their neighborhoods. Among those who were aware of the group home, nearly half – 45 percent – said the home positively affected the quality of life in the neighborhood. Only 9 percent said it had a negative effect. The rest said it had no effect or they did not know if it had an effect.

In half of the sites in this study, neighbors initially opposed the home. But, as residents gained a deeper understanding of the need for the homes, the level of supervision provided and the vigilant maintenance of the homes, their views changed.

Indeed, over time, many of the same neighbors saw themselves as part of a positive solution, recognizing that these homes

serve a valuable purpose in helping people live a more normal life and that they, as neighbors, were playing a supportive role in helping less advantaged citizens become part of a community.

Other case studies have similarly found that neighbors' actual experiences with these types of homes are more positive than they expected.<sup>12 13 14</sup>

## RESPECTING COMMUNITIES

Both state officials and many of the organizations that operate healing homes recognize the importance of being good neighbors and of building strong relationships with communities. In fact, many view themselves as part of the fabric of a community. To this end, the Department of Children and Families requires agencies to demonstrate that all staff are trained and supervised on positive community relations practices, such as fostering positive relationships with neighbors and the broader community, observing appropriate parking and driving practices and respectfully using community resources, such as parks.

In addition, state regulations require healing homes, once they are established, to convene a governing board that includes representatives from a town's civic, business or educational communities. These community-based boards offer advice on the home's policies, staff selection, physical environment and program activities. These panels also work with the home operators to build community relations, including hosting open houses and regularly communicating with citizens about the home's activities.

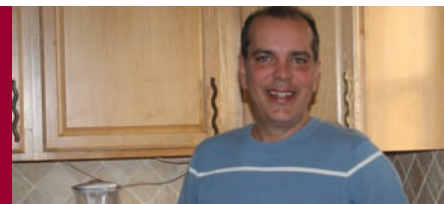
## WHY DIDN'T THEY TELL US THEY WERE PLANNING TO OPEN A HOME?

State and federal laws prohibit the state from requiring prior notification of the intention to establish a home of this type in a particular neighborhood. Doing so would be to treat these residents differently from everyone else. That violates their civil rights.

In fact, in 1988, after the federal Fair Housing Act was amended to include people with disabilities, it became widely recognized that requiring prior notification of the intention to open a group home would violate the spirit of the Fair Housing Act. Prior to this, New Jersey's administrative rules mandated that local officials be given advance notification. That provision was allowed to expire in light of changes to the federal law.

*"The program is staffed with resident advisors 24-7, around-the-clock supervision. At night staff is awake, which I think gives the community a real feeling of relief that the kids are being supervised and they are being watched. I think that's a key component."*

– Alex, group home director



## I'M NOT CONVINCED. WHAT CAN I DO TO PREVENT A HOME FROM LOCATING IN MY TOWN?

Both state and federal laws prohibit housing discrimination against these homes. The Federal Fair Housing Act states that people cannot be denied housing opportunities because of a disability. In addition, this Act prohibits discrimination based on "familial status." The courts have interpreted this to apply to children living in healing homes. That means that a local government cannot treat a group of children living together with unrelated adults any differently than a biological family.<sup>15</sup>

In addition, a local government would violate the Act if it blocked such a home from opening because neighbors did not want the home in their neighborhood. Further, the Fair Housing Act requires governments to make "reasonable accommodations" to allow housing for people with disabilities.

New Jersey's anti-discrimination laws extend similar legal protections. And, the state's Municipal Land Use Law<sup>16</sup> makes it illegal for local officials to use zoning laws to make group homes a prohibited use.

These state and federal laws also allow prevailing parties to recoup legal fees and, in some cases, monetary damages, stemming from improper attempts to interfere with the creation of the homes. This has resulted in municipalities incurring considerable expense when they attempt to fight the creation of a group home.

For more information on legal protections, please see the Child Advocate's Advisory, "Legal Safeguards: State and Federal Laws, Courts Protect Group Homes."



Acting Child Advocate Ronald K. Chen visits with 18-year-old Wesley at a South Jersey healing home.

*"I was able to see my family on the weekends. My family was able to come visit me. Now, I'm going to start at Camden County Community College, go there for two years and after that transfer to a 4-year college. Things are definitely better."*

– Wesley, 18, former group home resident, now a college student

## EVERY CHILD DESERVES A BACKYARD

The Child Advocate hopes this information is helpful to local and state officials and neighbors who may have a healing home in their neighborhood. In addition, the Child Advocate is happy to make available copies of these documents for the purpose of public education.

For more information or to learn more about the legal protections of these homes, go to [www.childadvocate.nj.gov](http://www.childadvocate.nj.gov) or contact our office at (609) 984-1188.



*"I got in a lot of trouble and it was just so crazy. I thought I wasn't even going to be here to see my 19th birthday. That's how rough it was. They put a roof over my head. They helped me get a job. Everybody was cool. They help you with all your problems."*

– Marcus, 19, group home resident, who plans to go to school for business

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