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PRINCETON: Housing for disabled eyed as township COAH option

By Greg Forester, Staff Writer

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Community Options Inc., a company that provides housing and employment opportunities for developmentally disabled individuals, could be a viable option when it comes to fulfilling affordable housing requirements, according to Princeton Township officials who heard a presentation before the Princeton Township Housing Board on Wednesday.

CEO and Princeton Borough resident Robert Stack, who made the presentation, said the company has already developed 65 homes in New Jersey and a total of 140 in the nation. He cited homes in Ewing, Hopewell, Hamilton, West Windsor, and other Mercer County municipalities.

Mr. Stack said Community Options will have a \$56 million budget next year, and already has homes in 16 of New Jersey's 21 counties.

Community Options provides housing and employment opportunities to those with neurological impairments such as autism, and similar conditions, he said.

He said the company's services address a need for adult living and employment opportunities that frequently emerges when disabled individuals are in adult age, and when parents or family can no longer provide adequate care.

The company, he said, creates housing opportunities for four residents or less, instead of larger group homes with many more occupants.

Community Options prefers to keep its housing operations "invisible" to the surrounding community, Mr. Stack said.

He said residents receive supervision and assistance 24 hours a day, with intensity based on their level of disability. Disabled persons in Community Options' housing tend to work at supermarkets and other businesses, or at enterprises run by Community Options itself.

Mr. Stack said the company runs facilities known as a "Daily Plan It" in several New Jersey locations, including West Windsor.

The facility off Alexander Road, which provides office space and office services, such as copying and binding, employs developmentally disabled individuals under the supervision of trainers.

"All of the services there are done by the developmentally disabled," Mr. Stack said.

The company's services are in greater demand nowadays than in the past, according to Mr. Stack, who said the trend stems from the closure of state-run or private facilities built to cater to the developmentally disabled population, according to Mr. Stack.

He cited the former North Princeton Developmental Center in Montgomery as an example of a closed facility that provided living and employment opportunities for disabled persons.

Housing Board Co-chairman David Cornell questioned if creating Community Options' housing opportunities in the township would fulfill affordable housing obligations, although he said it seemed like a "worthwhile endeavor."

However, Ed Schmierer, who is attorney for both the Housing Board and Township Committee, as well as Affordable Housing Coordinator Christy Peacock said Community Options-run housing would count toward the township's affordable housing quotas.

Mr. Schmierer said that Community Options' best strategy would be to locate and purchase existing housing at a subsidized price.

The township has approximately \$3 million in an affordable housing fund, according to Mr. Schmierer.