

Community Board Loses Fight to Keep Group Home out of Harlem Condo

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HARLEM—Rejecting a Central Harlem community board's argument that their neighborhood was oversaturated with group homes, state officials have approved a plan to house four developmentally disabled men in a luxury condo on Lenox Avenue.

Community Board 10 objected to the original plan by Community Options to purchase two apartments at Savoy West at 555 Lenox Ave. at West 138th Street for \$1 million to house seven men aged 17 to 22.

That plan was scaled back to one unit at \$500,000 because two group homes in the same building might have constituted oversaturation.

In examining the application, Commissioner Courtney Burke from the state's Office for People With Developmental Disabilities found that Community Options had established a "need for this residence in New York County."

Federal rulings from decades ago promoted de-institutionalizing developmentally disabled people. They were followed by Padavan's Law, passed in New York state in the 1970s, which helped guide the placement of supportive housing to aid community living.

"I can find no concrete and convincing evidence in the record to support the Community Board's contention that the nature and character of the area would be substantially altered by the establishment of the proposed residence when considered in conjunction with existing similar residences," Burke wrote in a May letter to CB 10 chair Henrietta Lyle and Community Options.

Community Options said there were only 17 people housed in two group homes in the same census tract as the proposed residence at Savoy West. OPWDD statistics show there are 20 group homes in the zip codes that make up Central Harlem.

"We look at this as the emancipation of people who have been living on campuses their whole lives," said Christopher Thompson, executive director for Community Options New York.

CB 10 contended that there were between 84 and 96 beds in 12 group homes of various sizes within its boundaries.

The board has had a moratorium against approving "special interest" housing since 2008. Other neighborhoods should also host their fair share of group homes, halfway houses and drug treatment facilities, the board contends.

But Burke said there was no evidence those other facilities fell into the same category as this proposed group home. Burke also said the residence was a necessary part of a state plan to eliminate the waiting list for community placements.

"We would have liked to have won this but we are okay with their decision and we are not

going to fight it," said Lyle after receiving the letter.

She said the board felt misled at times by Community Options when they discussed whether the board even had a say in the matter and the needs of the men who will be living in the group home.

Thompson said he understood CB 10's concerns, especially about the multiple apartments. "People have come in and abused the real estate. Some people have said they are opening restaurants that turn out to be nightclubs that stay open until 4:30 a.m.," said Thompson.

"But if you were a parent to these young men, you'd want the best for your child," he added.

Because none of the young men are from Harlem, Thompson said he's trying to make the group home benefit the neighborhood by hiring 12 members of a community support staff from the area.

The staff is responsible for helping to ingratiate the group home's new residents into the community. Full-time and part-time positions will start at \$12 per hour, including some with benefits.

"If we can work with the community, we will," said Thompson. "We want people from Harlem to help the new residents get used to their new neighborhood."

Lyle said the board had no regrets for pushing to make sure occupants of the group home were from Harlem.

"We want to know that these social service agencies are working in our community," Lyle said.

Cindy Fagan, a spokeswoman for OPWDD, said that Community Options will conduct an assessment to determine the needs of the individuals in the group home. OPWDD will also conduct an assessment before the facility is allowed to open.

"Consideration is given to each person's medical needs, the support they require for fire and life safety and protective oversight, their dietary needs, their ability to participate in the community, and the specific training staff will need to provide supports," said Fagan.

By: Jeff Mays, DNAInfo Reporter

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