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Fix NJ group homes through collaboration, not prosecution | Opinion

Charles "Chuck" McLister Special to the USA TODAY Network

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Anyone who cares about how New Jersey serves its developmentally disabled residents should also care about how the state and press react to incidents that occur in group homes. Community-based group homes replaced the large, state-run institutional facilities that became notorious for abuse and neglect in the 1970s. New Jersey has over 130 group home providers, many of which do great work supporting people with developmental challenges. Elwyn is one of the largest, supporting over 180 people throughout southern New Jersey.

Elwyn is a nonprofit that has served people with intellectual disabilities for 174 years, founded by abolitionists who looked after society's most vulnerable people. Elwyn provides support and treatment for developmentally challenged adults and children in eight states, including New Jersey. Elwyn has been in New Jersey since 1980, when it saved the Vineland Training School (est. 1888) from closure, forming Elwyn New Jersey.

In early 2023, employees at one of our group homes failed a resident. That failure was real, and so was our response: we immediately suspended every employee responsible for the incident, dismissed each after an internal investigation, and reported our findings to our regulator, the state Department of Human Services (DHS). We immediately began major reforms in our hiring, training, and compensation practices.

We cooperated fully with state prosecutors, who later charged the direct care staff responsible individually. We agreed. If you neglect or abuse someone in your care, you should face consequences. Full stop.

But the former New Jersey Attorney General went further: he charged Elwyn itself with conspiring to neglect its own residents, despite the overwhelming evidence of Elwyn's policies and training, which were not followed by the negligent employees. He charged not just the employees who failed that resident but the nonprofit that fired them and took immediate corrective action in coordination with DHS. As far as I know, no charitable organization in New Jersey has ever faced such charges.

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Last month, the new Attorney General dismissed those baseless charges. The decision to pursue criminal charges in the first place reflects a troubling approach to oversight — one that treats providers as adversaries rather than partners in serving vulnerable populations.

The former Attorney General, the Bergen Record, and a steady stream of misleading online commentary have focused disproportionately and unfairly on Elwyn — not because our data was the worst, but because we hold ourselves accountable, monitor care with video cameras in most homes (though cameras are not required by state law), and freely share our data and findings with DHS, as required.

Nevertheless, we saw room to improve, and Elwyn's commitment to quality and safety predates any regulatory scrutiny:

> We began the process for Praesidium Accreditation — the gold standard for abuse and neglect prevention — in late 2023, 18 months before any state letter arrived.
> Since 2023, Elwyn New Jersey staff have received 1,546 hours of abuse prevention training.
> We've had cameras in our group homes since 2019, years before most other providers; it's still not a requirement.
> We built a QR code system so any visitor can flag a concern in real time.

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We also engaged an independent monitor to hold ourselves accountable — not because a court required it, but because we proposed it. These steps reflect who we are, not a response to external pressure. Organizations committed to their mission don't resist oversight; they embrace it.

On staffing — a challenge that affects every group home provider in this sector — Elwyn has led the way. Serving this population is hard work and not richly compensated under the federal and state programs that fund group home services.

Despite that, since 2017, we have raised wages for direct support staff 75%, pushing the minimum DSP wage from $11 an hour to $19.25 today. You don't address a crisis with press releases and indictments; you address it with a paycheck for workers that care for our most vulnerable, so they can make a living wage.

The results speak for themselves: staffing-related incidents are down 98%, and turnover among direct support professionals is down 19%. This month, the same state office that initially raised concerns about our staffing challenges wrote us a different letter: DHS found that we reduced staff turnover and absences and substantially reduced incidents involving injuries or neglect.

As a result, DHS recently lifted the moratorium on new admissions it imposed in early 2025. This is what is possible when the state and providers work together to solve problems, rather than litigate them.

That conviction endures. It's why the employees who mistreated the resident in the 2023 incident were terminated for failing to follow their training and meet Elwyn's standards of care. It's why we challenged the former attorney general's decision to prosecute the institution that held those employees accountable. And it's why, 174 years later, we remain committed to every person we support — in daylight, on camera, with the receipts to prove it. That success should be celebrated by The Record.

Charles "Chuck" McLister is the eleventh president and chief executive officer of Elwyn, Inc.

Editor's Note: The Record stands by its reporting in the "Hidden at Home" series which documented problems across New Jersey's group home industry, including at Elwyn facilities. Our coverage noted concerns raised by residents, families and state inspectors about Elwyn that went beyond one incident. A May 2025 letter from the state Department of Human Services to the company noted hundreds of reported incidents of staff shortages, unplanned hospital visits for residents and neglect allegations between 2023 and 2025. While improvements since then may indeed be worth celebrating, the past complaints about the company were newsworthy.