

Who works with the developmentally disabled?



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Melody Williams is a program assistant at A Very Special Place on Hylan Boulevard in Grasmere.



Resident assistant Dawn Salerno comforts a resident at A Very Special Place.

SECOND IN A FOUR-PART SERIES

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Some Islanders express concern that many staffers are not required to undergo criminal background checks and random drug tests

By KATHLEEN LUCADAMO
ADVANCE STAFF WRITER

Some have a master's in psychology, or a doctorate in speech pathology, or a bachelor's in music. Others have earned a high school diploma.

They are former hairdressers and food service employees; some are students and social workers.

Still, some Staten Islanders say concern about the people who work with the developmentally disabled is among the top reasons they oppose siting community residences in their neighborhoods.

What they fear, they say, is an influx of low-paid, ill-trained staffers, many of whom are not required to undergo random drug tests or criminal background checks.

"You hear all these tragedies that happen because there are no background checks and then it is too late," says Rose Nelli, of Westerleigh, where the Independent Living Association plans to house eight developmentally disabled adults.

But Ms. Nelli is only half correct.

The state of New York, which operates 37 homes on Staten Island, does require criminal background checks and drug testing for all of its employees working in community residences.

However, the state does not require voluntary agencies, which operate some 90 community residences here with state funds, to abide by the same rules. Consequently, background checks and drug testing are left to the discretion of each individual agency.

Some, like the Brooklyn-based Independent Living Association, which already operates six residences here, simply do not see the need.

"We've been in business 15 years and there has been no evidence of drug use or criminal activity," says Jennifer Briggs, director of human resources. The agency conducts two interviews, checks two references, performs a Department of Motor Vehicles check and verifies education, she adds.

But that is not enough to satisfy some Islanders.

"New York state doesn't require any criminal background checks [for voluntary agencies] and that scares me," says Deborah Bisogna, of Westerleigh. "They are taking care of vulnerable people."

Only a few states require criminal background checks and random drug tests across the board. But advocates

for the mentally retarded hope the increased scrutiny becomes a national phenomenon.

"It seems to be an increasing trend to require drug and criminal background checks," says Doreen Croser, executive director of the American Association on Mental Retardation, in Washington, D.C.

But, she says, checks and tests are expensive and can take up to three months to complete, leaving essential positions vacant for too long.

"It is definitely a concern," Ms. Croser says. "We want the most qualified people we can get. Criminal and drug tests are only one element of a competent, qualified work force."

Another issue of concern to some Islanders is what they perceive as a lack of effective training for community residence staffers.

"There are so many ways where high quality services are assured," says Deborah Sturm Rausch, a spokeswoman for the state Office of Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities (OMRDD). "We have a strong system of checks and balances."

Generally, the state requires across-the-board training before anyone can work independently in a community residence. Sessions cover topics such as human growth and development, abuse prevention, laws and regulations, and safety and security procedures.

The state allows each voluntary agency to determine its own training time frame, which is usually about two weeks. Staffers at state-run residences train off-site for at least two weeks with additional on-site training, depending on the needs of the residents.

The state also conducts annual reviews of each community residence to determine staff competency, which includes an adequate employee-to-client ratio, and checks on whether training was conducted.

Most community residences in the borough employ a professional with a college degree to track the goals of each residence and ensure quality control. Such self-monitoring also is required by the state.

"There is a partnership with state and voluntary providers," says Ms. Rausch. "We work together to plan and implement services."

Also, many local agencies conduct ongoing training throughout the year to refresh staff on policy and procedures.

Each residence usually also employs a residential director, who serves as a manager, to monitor staff and interact with residents. Requirements can include a college degree and several years of related experience. There is also at least one assistant director, who is required to have experience but not a college degree.

Most residence staffers, however, are direct care workers, who assist clients in day-to-day tasks such as tying their shoelaces, getting dressed, brushing their teeth and eating. The minimum requirement is a high school diploma.

When it comes to background checks, random drug tests, and training, local agencies run the gamut.

A Very Special Place

A Very Special Place (AVSP), a Dongan Hills agency that operates five homes in the borough, conducts citywide criminal checks, unless an applicant has worked in another part of New York or in another state. In that case, a statewide check is performed. The agency does not administer drug tests.

AVSP also requires at least two weeks of on-site training. Further certification is available for intervention techniques, administering medication and first aid.

Each AVSP community residence employs a residential director with a bachelor's degree and at least four years' experience, one of which must be in a supervisory role, and an assistant residential director, who must have related experience. Direct care staff needs depend on the number of residents.

"The direct care workers are not the only people working here," says Diane Buglioli, deputy

executive director of AVSP. "There's a whole team of people — of which they are members — with a mix of backgrounds, experience, education and responsibilities. But the assumption that everyone comes in from high school would be erroneous."

"Wash your hands now, before you eat, because your dinner is going to get cold," Vanessa Mason says in a maternal tone.

Ms. Mason is a direct care worker at an AVSP-run community residence in Dongan Hills for moderately to profoundly mentally retarded adults in their 40s and 50s.

For her, it's a rewarding career choice.

"At the end of the day, I can go home and say I did a good deed," she says.

Community Resources

Community Resources for the Developmentally Disabled

(CRDD), a Travis-based agency that operates seven homes here, conducts federal criminal background checks and drug tests on potential employees.

"It is costly but we feel it is necessary to protect our program participants and residents in our homes," says Dana Magee, executive director.

If allegations of resident abuse arise, CRDD suspends the accused staff member without pay until the charges are cleared up. Even using foul language can constitute abuse.

"It happens infrequently, but it happens," admits Barbara Devaney, director of development and community relations.

On Your Mark

On Your Mark, a West Brighton-based agency operating 15 community residences here, does not require criminal background checks or drug testing. The agency

provides at least two weeks of training, both on-site and at the agency. College degrees are not required for supervisory positions but related experience is necessary.

Those requirements were enough to satisfy Lorraine DeSantis, whose son, David, 21, lives at On Your Mark's community residence in Dongan Hills.

"It is like handing a 2-year-old to a baby-sitter or dropping him off at a day care center you've never tried before," she says.

Like most parents with adult children living in community residences, Ms. DeSantis says she visits often, has developed relationships with staff members and feels free to discuss her concerns with supervisors.

"You need to develop trust in the people that care for him," she says. "It alleviates some of the anxiety."

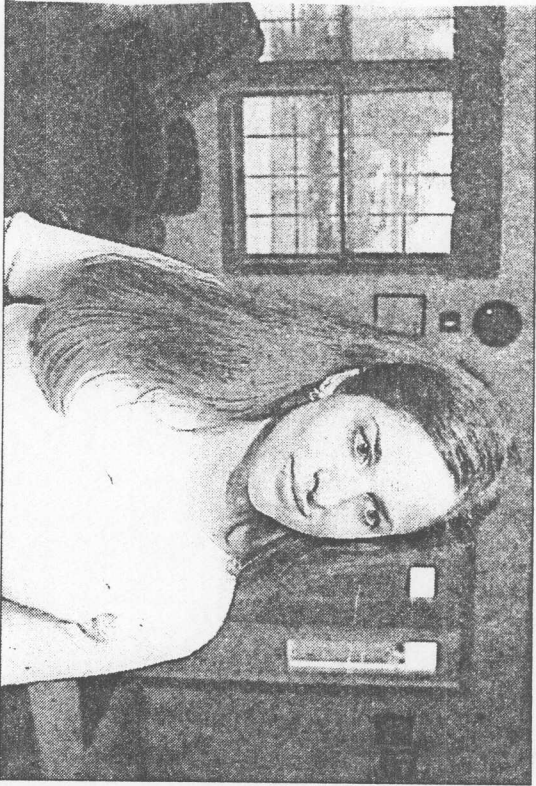
Low pay, high commitment

Average annual pay for direct care staff is about \$19,000 a year. And supervisors' salaries range from \$25,000 to \$45,000.

In today's booming job market human services advocates say, takes a high level of commitment to stay with such relatively low paying positions, which stands as a testament to the devotion of many staffers.

"People have to love the job," says Jennifer Benoit, executive director of AVSP. "There would be any other reason to be in the field. You must like the work and be suited for it."

"In general, the people who are in the business of providing care do an excellent job," says Ms. Rausch of the OMRDD. "It takes a special person to work with people who have developmental disabilities and those are the special people who go into this line of work."



Amy Romanelli is the residents director at the Benton Avenue home for A Very Special Place.



Alice Bray, a cook and housekeeper for the Hylan Boulevard residence of A Very Special Place.

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