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## TRACKING ABUSE A DIFFICULT TASK

## VIOLENCE, POOR CARE IN GROUP HOMES UNDERREPORTED

Hartford Courant - Hartford, Conn.

Subjects: Group homes; Sex crimes; Disabled people; Assaults; Employees; Criminal investigations

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## Document Text

In the summer of 2011, Angelica Rivera took out her frustrations, she told police, on a 24-year-old woman with autism and the intellectual capacity of a 10-year-old -- kicking the mentally frail woman, whipping her with a belt and dragging her by the hair across the floor of the small East Hartford group home where Rivera worked and the disabled woman lived.

A cellphone video of the attack made its way to local police nearly a year later, and the disturbing images prompted outrage well beyond East Hartford. But one detail was mostly lost in the intense coverage: An official with the group home's parent company -- which cares for about two dozen developmentally disabled residents across the state -- told police that eight other employees had been fired for abuse in the nine months before Rivera was arrested.

If she hasn't already, Rivera will likely be added to a non-public Connecticut registry of caregivers for the developmentally disabled who were fired for abuse and neglect. More than 125 names appear on the list -- but few believe that number captures the scope of abuse perpetrated on an often defenseless population.

"It's the most vulnerable people," said Julie Huso, executive director of VOR, a national group that advocates for those with intellectual and developmental disabilities. "These are individuals who are very high-risk. They cannot speak for themselves. And we are seeing a huge, huge problem in the country with abuse."

Gauging the true frequency of that abuse is difficult. When poor care leads to the death of a developmentally disabled person in Connecticut, the tragic consequences are obvious. But when mistreatment leads to nonfatal injuries or trauma -- including cases where clients are physically or sexually victimized by their caregivers -- the harm is not always evident, and the misdeed can escape the state's system of oversight and accountability.

Rivera's misdeeds might have remained secret forever, but for a dispute among employees that apparently led to the disclosure of the cellphone video. Officials with the state Department of Developmental Services promptly froze admissions at the six group homes run by Options Unlimited and applied "enhanced monitoring," including putting inspectors in the homes on a daily basis. Options Unlimited said it fired Rivera and increased training of its employees.

The department had done routine inspections of the homes in the past, finding problems with the condition of furniture and the use of restraints and accounting for clients' personal property. But inspectors could not see that a client had been assaulted.

Likewise, police alleged that a worker at an East Lyme group home sexually assaulted a disabled man for more than a year without consequences before the victim came forward.

In North Haven, the guardians of a developmentally disabled woman have filed suit against the state and a group home employee who, they say, molested the woman. The suit alleges that the worker routinely undressed the woman over an extended period of time and was stopped only after a co-worker reported that the woman was naked on her bed with the employee in her room and the door closed.

And in a case that stunned state officials, a worker at a public group home in Danielson allegedly admitted to police a year ago that he had sex on a weekly basis with two severely disabled women in his care for more than a decade before the abuse was discovered. Ellis K. Hagstrom had been employed by the state Department of Developmental Services since 1987. The assaults began around 2000 and were discovered only after medical personnel began investigating a bruise on one of the women's thighs. Hagstrom was fired and now faces dozens of criminal charges.

Department officials say they have no tolerance for assaults against developmentally disabled clients, and say they maintain the abuse and neglect registry as part of an effort to minimize that mistreatment. Agencies are required to consult the registry before hiring workers, and must check it twice a year and fire any employees who show up on the list. Both the names of the workers and the nature of their misdeeds are kept secret from the public. Some cases become known through criminal proceedings. Many more remain in the shadows.

Terrence Macy, commissioner of the Department of Developmental Services, says abuse cases should not deflect from the good work done by the majority of caregivers. "Most public and private employees provide the utmost care and support to thousands of individuals they serve," Macy said.

But advocates say the abuse figures illustrate how vulnerable some clients are and how important it is to ensure that direct-care workers are qualified and trained.

Leslie Simoes, executive director of The Arc Connecticut, which advocates for developmentally disabled residents in the state, said a funding squeeze has meant fewer caregivers who are offered less training. With cuts in funding to providers, some direct-care workers for private agencies have had to work second jobs to make ends meet, Simoes said. And as staffing shrinks, some caregivers are the only employees on their shift for what Simoes said is more work than one person can do.

"This is not easy work, and if you are working day-in and day-out and you never see another person, you can snap," she said.

An analysis by the legislature's program review and investigations committee in September 2011 found that the average hourly wage for a direct-care worker in the private sector was \$15.53, although workers employed directly by the state earned substantially more.

But the nearly 16,000 men and women receiving services from the department at any given time are at risk of harm from more than frazzled or malevolent caregivers.

From 2004 to 2011, agencies reported 368 incidents in which clients were sexually victimized, including 37 rapes. Physical assaults were far more common, topping 5,000 over the eight years, although the numbers have been declining, and serious assaults make up a small fraction of the cases. In most cases, the assaults were perpetrated by other clients.

Nationally, studies have consistently shown that people with intellectual disabilities are at a greater risk for violent victimization. The Justice Department's Bureau of Justice Statistics found that 3 percent of people age 12 and over with cognitive disabilities were the victims of robbery or physical or sexual assault in 2010 -- twice the rate at which those without disabilities were victimized. Excluding minor assaults, those with cognitive disabilities are more than three times as likely to be victimized.

Nora J. Baladerian, project director of the Disability and Abuse Project in Los Angeles, said those with disabilities are victimized at high rates as a result of isolation, an imbalance of power and vulnerability.

"But more than anything, it's negative attitudes toward people with disabilities," Baladerian said. "And part of that is built on myths and stereotypes that are taught to children as they grow up, and some is just plain old ignorance."

And when people with disabilities are victimized, those crimes are also less likely to be reported to police, the Justice Department found. Advocates say particularly with sexual abuse, people with severe disabilities may not understand what is happening or recognize that it is illegal. And when cases are reported, an intellectual disability can diminish a victim's perceived credibility.

"I work with victims," Baladerian said. "And my victims with developmental disabilities are mostly not believed by law enforcement when they get brave enough to disclose what happened to them."

Last November, a former driver for Abilis, a Greenwich-based nonprofit that runs group homes and employment services for the developmentally disabled, was convicted of second-degree sexual assault -- but acquitted of more serious charges -- after he had sex with a woman with the mental capacity of no more than a 9-year-old.

Authorities said Wanto Polynice was supposed to drive the woman from her group home to a job training class, but instead ordered her back into her room, blocked the door and pushed her on her bed.

Senior Assistant State's Attorney Paul Ferencek told jurors the case was about "a very vulnerable girl, who ... was trying to achieve some measure of independence. And the very person who was out there, who was supposed to look after her, who was supposed to make sure that she was OK and give her assistance, violated her," according to news reports of the trial.

The woman testified in court, and Polynice was convicted of having sex with a person incapable of consenting. But he was acquitted on charges of forcible rape. He was sentenced last month to eight years in prison.

Department officials say they are committed to keeping clients safe and well cared for, and say their goal of moving more developmentally disabled individuals into community settings will help. Better integration into neighborhoods and closer involvement of families will make it more difficult to hide mistreatment, as well as poor care, they say.

Simoes, from The Arc Connecticut, says something else is needed: money.

When she worked in a group home, Simoes said, low wages led to a revolving door of direct-care workers, which was especially bad for volatile clients who needed consistency to remain emotionally stable.

"I saw firsthand what the underfunding of the system did to the people I was advocating for," she said.

Since then, Simoes said, the funding equation has only gotten worse. And that, she said, has taken a toll on the quality of the staffing -- and the safety of clients.

"The provider system is getting cut and cut and cut, and they're being asked to do more and more and more," Simoes said. "And there are consequences to that."

Credit: MATTHEW KAUFFMAN, JOSH KOVNER and DAVE ALTIMARI, mkauffman@courant.com

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Abstract (Document Summary)

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