

A place to call home for those with a disability

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When Kim Smith couldn't provide the full amount of care and assistance her daughter Jessica needed at home, she was relieved to know help was available through group homes for the developmentally disabled.

While some children and adults with developmental disabilities live with their parents for most of their lives, many must go to a group home where they live in a house with two or three other developmentally disabled individuals under the 24-hour care and supervision of trained staff.

"Maybe a judge has gotten involved with (the Department of Human Resources) or they just need someone that is trained better in organization and structure for them and with more supervision," Scharlene Chamblee said.

Chamblee and her husband, Gary, operate GSC Care, which has several group homes in Boaz and Albertville for young men with developmental disabilities. GSC began in 2001 as a group home for adolescent boys, but many of the boys now in the home are in their 20s or 30s.

GSC Care and other group home companies purchase houses in regular neighborhoods throughout the community where their clients can live.

"We don't have a big sign in the yard saying home for the handicapped," Chamblee said. "That's why many people don't know we're here.

"The main thing I want folks to understand about group homes is it's three individuals that share a home, share expenses and they're just like everybody else. They're probably some of the best neighbors you'll ever have because they are concerned and compassionate about people."

Choosing the right home

Smith began looking into group homes for Jessica when Jessica was 10 years old. It was not easy for her, but Smith believed putting Jessica in a group home would give her daughter more resources to help her grow to her potential. Jessica did not complain.

"She was all for it," Smith said. "She loved being around all the children, the adults, the structure. She was ready to stay the day we visited.

"I wasn't sure I was ready for that, but they said it would benefit her better to start the training needs and teaching."

Since then, Smith said Jessica has "had a bought" with group homes in Gadsden, Huntsville and Guntersville. Now she is settled in a home in Albertville operated by the organization Holly's Homes, just 10 minutes away from her mother.

“It’s awesome,” Smith said. “They’re pretty much a godsend.”

Smith still has regular contact with Jessica every weekend and on special occasions. Most group home residents want to spend time with their family, but not all have that opportunity.

“It’s at the level that the family wants and at the level that some of the boys are able to handle,” Chamblee said. “We try to work them back with having more contact with their families, but when their families are not consistent with that contact, it causes the boys a lot of problems.”

Nalda Kitchens, director of the Marshall County Arc day habilitation center, a United Way partner agency, encourages all the parents of her clients to talk to an attorney they trust and plan for their child’s future care. Sometimes, particularly for elderly parents, this means putting their adult child in a group home.

“They feel like the world thinks they’re giving up on their child or giving their child away, but in reality, they’re just helping them plan for their future,” she said.

If a parent dies without legal documentation directing the care of their adult child, the state must decide what to do with the individual.

“Ideally, a family member takes them, but if that is not available, generally they can be placed in a group home,” Kitchens said. “The state tends to find funding for a crisis like that.

“Ideally the parent wants to make that decision. They don’t want to the state to make that decision.”

Choosing the best group home can sometimes be difficult, though. Jessica had a particularly negative experience with one that left a major impression with her mother.

“That’s been the hardest thing ever,” Smith said. “If they are in a group home, be very involved. Don’t just leave them there for somebody else to take care of and watch. Monitor the things that are going on.”

Chamblee focuses on creating a safe and constructive atmosphere for her clients. With 24-hour access to an on-call nurse and highly trained staff members that keep watch over the home in shifts, she assures her clients are cared for.

“This is a place for them to be where they’re safe and secure and they can learn and continue to grow,” she said.

Training for independence

The group homes, often called training homes, also help teach independent living skills, such as operating kitchen appliances, cleaning or even vocational skills. One of Chamblee’s residents is learning the parts of a car engine because he hopes to one day work with automobiles.

“You have to find out what they’re interested in, and then they’re willing to get skills in those areas,” she said.

“I’ve got several that are employable and we’re working toward getting them employed, but there’s so many people looking for a job that it’s hard.”

Some group home residents may need that level of care and supervision their whole lives. However, Chamblee said some could be trained well enough to eventually go back home with their families or even live on their own.

“Our goal with all of them, if they’re able to, is to get the skills necessary to live as independently as possible,” she said.

Part of that effort also includes improving social skills. To that end, GSC encourages their clients to participate in the community and a mentorship program with the Snead State Community College women’s basketball team.

“Those girls are amazing,” Chamblee said. “It’s been a wonderful thing for them, and our guys are really into it. It makes them feel like they fit in. That’s all they want.”

Group homes and training centers also teach clients about giving back through volunteer work. For example, Arc clients have helped pack Christmas boxes for the county’s Care Assurance System for the Aging and Homebound. GSC residents have assisted with cleanup efforts after the tornadoes that have torn through Marshall County in recent years.

“They’re in a position where people are always giving to them,” Kitchens said. “We try real hard to teach them to give to others. They need to be valued in their community, and that’s a way they can be valued.”

Funding

Most group homes and day habilitation or training centers are supported by the Alabama Department of Mental Health and medicaid. These non-profit agencies must also procure some local funding.

However, with recent budget cuts, Medicaid adjustments and system changes, agency leaders are finding it more difficult to provide their services to all who need it.

Organizations like the Arc are paid a service fee per day for each individual based on that individual’s need, regardless of the agency’s budget.

“It’s not so bad in a perfect world if you had 100 percent attendance and all the clients that need services could come to your program,” Kitchens said. “You could probably make that work. So just because I’ve had two clients to leave my program doesn’t mean I can go to the state department and say I’m staffed well enough I could have two replacement people. They won’t give them to me. There’s no federal or state money to go with them.”

Those who need assistance from these programs must sign up through the Alabama Department of Mental Health and are put on a statewide waiting list. When funding becomes available, it is provided for those at the top of the list or who are deemed most critical. Currently, the state list has 2,000 names of people requiring services on the waiting list, and Marshall County alone has 25 people waiting for

day habilitation services, according to Kitchens.

“Say the person with the greatest need lives in Mobile, so that’s where the money’s going,” she said. “It kind of makes sense in theory, but it does have some limitations for us. I would like to serve a few more people, and I’m not really allowed to at this point. Due to state funding limitations, I can’t enroll additional clients at this time.”

Kitchens worries these funding issues will limit the future growth of her agency. Chamblee is concerned as well. For that reason, she urges parents to get their child on the state list as soon as possible.

“I get worried because of budget cuts,” Chamblee said. “Will these services be here for these folks? Everybody keeps getting cut and cut and cut. I’m afraid we’ll have to start dropping services and there will be less and less group homes for these individuals. Where are they going to live?”