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Hard Times Hit Home for a Band of Five in Illinois

Stuffed Animals Are Packed in Boxes; Victor Wilhold's Uncertain Future

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HIGHLAND, Ill. -- Five friends, one blind, another an amputee and all developmentally impaired to some degree, are losing their home here next week.

Community Link, the nonprofit agency that runs the group home, can no longer afford to keep it open. Its main source of funds, the cash-strapped state of Illinois, owes it \$1.4 million. Positions have been consolidated and spending has been cut back. Last week, John Foppe, Community Link's executive director and himself disabled, went to the local bank and begged for a new line of credit to make his payrolls. Even if it's approved, the home will be closed.



Movers arrive Tuesday. The five will end up in three different homes spread around the county. Their belongings -- mainly clothes, stuffed animals, puzzles and little ceramic statues -- are being packed in boxes.

The agency is trying to make the move smooth but acknowledges it will be disruptive to everyone, particularly Victor Wilhold. Mr. Wilhold, 59 years old, is the eldest, chronologically, but the most childlike of the five. Born with Downs Syndrome, he is largely nonverbal and functions at the level of a three-year-old.

Clare Ansberry/The Wall Street Journal
Highland group home resident JoAnn Webb holds Victor Wilhold's hand.

In the past, when his routine was changed, he grew reclusive, retreating to a darkened closet with an assortment of toys, according to his sister, Mary Harris. "I'm afraid he will go back into his shell," she says.

Over the years, he and the other four residents -- three women and one man -- have formed their own makeshift family. Sometimes they bicker. One is stubborn, another feisty and another is a mother hen. But they also care for each other. If someone is sick and can't go to a movie, the others vote to stay home.



Ms. Harris asked Community Link to keep this little family together in their next residence, but that would mean displacing other people there.

What is happening in this southern, largely rural corner of Illinois is echoed around the state as a history of low funding for community living collides with the economic crisis, forcing drastic cuts. People with disabilities are being moved into larger, unfamiliar settings or spending their days idle because vans no longer take them to sheltered workshops to do jobs for pay.

Clare Ansberry/The Wall Street Journal
The residents of the group home in Highland, Ill., which is closing Dec. 2.

"Even in decent economic times, Illinois was not a state that funded people with developmental disabilities to the extent that other states have," says Lilia Teninty, director of the state's Division of Developmental Disabilities.

Illinois came in dead last -- 51st -- among all states and the District of Columbia in providing small residential settings for people with developmental disabilities. In terms of overall spending for community programs, it ranked 43rd.

Community Link hasn't been paid by the state since July for many services. Mr. Foppe and his staff whittled budgets, eliminating small bonuses, rug cleaning and renovation plans.

Although helpful, those cuts weren't nearly enough. Reluctantly, he decided to close the Highland house.

It was the smallest of six such homes, which has meant more freedom, privacy and choice for residents. It was also the most expensive to run for those same reasons. Moving to something bigger is a step in the wrong direction, Mr. Foppe says, but he has little choice.

Having been born without arms and learning to use his feet to drive, eat and dress, Mr. Foppe isn't easily discouraged or frustrated. But he is becoming both. "Even a sponge can only hold so much water," he says.

Chris Gebke, who runs Community Link's community-service programs, had the delicate task of figuring out where to move everyone. Jane Webb, who is legally blind and prone to seizures, needs a private room so that she knows where everything is and doesn't trip on a roommate's belongings. Her furniture must line the walls. Her shoes and slippers need to be tucked under a desk.

Smoking Break

Lorraine Cousino's family wanted to make sure she could go freely outside in her wheelchair and smoke a cigarette after dinner. That meant moving her to a house with a garage so she would be protected out of doors.

JoAnn Lange wanted a house close to a nursing home so she could volunteer.



Clare Ansberry/The Wall Street Journal

Victor Wilhold used to carry dozens of stuffed animals from room to room. Now, he leaves them on his bed. Above, Mr. Wilhold and his favorite bear.

Ms. Gebke met with employees of the homes, reviewing seemingly small but important details. Allen Korte has a special shampoo. You have to let Mr. Korte make the coffee in the morning or he gets upset, she told them.

Even with all the details in place, she worries. Ms. Lange will be leaving her hometown, where her 78-year-old father lives. The highest functioning resident, she learned to use public transportation to volunteer at the local nursing home. She has cancer and her support group is there.

She cried when told of the move. "All my relations are here. I'm originally from Highland. Now I've got to move my routine," she says.

Ms. Cousino says she will miss the neighbors, especially the boy next door. She met him when he was three and has watched him grow into a teenager.

In 'His Happy Spot'

But it will likely be hardest on Mr. Wilhold. His sister, Ms. Harris, says he was shuffled through a series of inappropriate settings after his parents died, including a nursing home for old people. And he was put on medications for conditions he didn't have, for reasons she doesn't understand. He came to the Highland House in 2002.

When he first arrived, he kept to himself and his stuffed animals, carrying dozens of them throughout the day from room to room. Renae Donohoo, who works at the home, couldn't get him into the van without putting a Tigger from "Winnie the Pooh" there first.

"Now he leaves his animals on his bed," she says. "He doesn't need them because he's in his happy spot," referring to the house.

He didn't speak growing up, but lately has been saying a few words. "C'mon old lady, let's go," he ordered Ms. Lange.

The others here are protective of him and have come to understand his gestures. When he taps his mouth, he's thirsty.

Ms. Lange leads him by the hand up the driveway when he gets off the bus, and buys him 3 Musketeers bars. After dinner, Mr. Wilhold accompanies Ms. Cousino to the garage for her evening smoke, opening and closing the door for her and her wheelchair. Of the five, she is the most outspoken, but with Mr. Wilhold she is gentle. Outside, she gives him one earpiece of her MP3 player so they can both listen to Elvis.

"I don't how it will be for Victor," says Ms. Donohoo. "He has his own little room here. It will be a big adjustment after all these years."

Fortunately, she says, he will share a bedroom with housemate Mr. Korte, which should make it easier but by no means carefree. Mr. Korte likes to go to bed early. Mr. Wilhold can stay up. Mr. Korte keeps his room immaculate. Mr. Wilhold doesn't.

This weekend, the five friends will celebrate Allen Korte's birthday with his favorite dessert, chocolate cheesecake. He will sit at the head of the table, as he always does. He will have to adjust to new seating arrangements at his new house.

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