

Refuge for mentally ill in Tinton Falls home

Group program offers treatment — and hope

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Asbury Park Press

USA TODAY NETWORK - NEW JERSEY

Sitting at the dining room table of a cozy Tinton Falls townhouse, Dwayne Patterson took out his pillbox and laid out his tablets: one to curb his alcohol cravings, one for the voices in his head and others sorted by color and size.

“I haven’t heard no voices in about 18 months, and it helps really well,” said Patterson, 57, an Easterseals resident who has schizophrenia and is recovering from drug addiction. “I take my medication twice a day. They let me pack (the pillbox) for a week at a time.”

Patterson is one of some 3,500 people in New Jersey with mental illnesses taking refuge in programs like Easterseals, according to the state Division of Mental Health and Addiction Services. He’s in one of 17 group homes operated by Easterseals in Monmouth County.

Some programs, such as Patterson’s, offer group housing and monitor residents for four to 12 hours at a time. Others let residents live alone and offer health services.

Thousands of program participants have spent months undergoing mental health treatment and learning daily skills such as taking their medication, cleaning up after themselves and cooking as they transition to living alone.

“Most of our consumers are coming out of psychiatric hospitals. Whether they’re living in their own apartment or living in a regular group home, it (the program) is to make them feel that

they are part of that society,” said Kelly Bowles, director of residential services for Easterseals. “It’s about giving them as normal a life as possible, assisting

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them in becoming independent. That’s our goal.”

The state has “supportive housing” contracts with 43 agencies, including group home operators such as Easterseals. Such facilities have sometimes drawn the ire of neighbors who don’t want adults with mental illnesses in their communities, assuming it would lead to spikes in crime. Yet group homes continue to launch in their towns because they are protected by federal laws on housing discrimination.

Advocates argue that the government-funded group homes offer at-risk residents a chance to rebuild their lives through cost-efficient programs. Without these programs, they could end up without access to treatment, ultimately leading to homelessness.

The National Alliance to End Homelessness says “providing access to housing generally results in cost savings for communities because housed people are less likely to use emergency services, including hospitals, jails and emergency shelter, than those who are homeless.”

The alliance cites a recent study that suggests sheltering one person through Housing First, a permanent supportive housing program, leads to a savings of \$31,545 in emergency services. The study cited in the National Alliance to End Homelessness also suggests the program could cost up to \$23,000 less per resident per year than a shelter program.

“Having a safe and secure place to live is an important part of getting well, giving people with mental illness a sense of pride, community and self-sufficiency and helping them gain their independence,” said Ellen Lovejoy, a spokesperson for the Department of Health, which oversees the Division for Mental Health and Addiction Services.

Starting over

In his old life, Patterson said he spent his days panhandling and chasing his



next fix of cocaine or alcohol. He racked up a long list of charges, including drug possession and burglary, according to the criminal court database. At night, he slept in abandoned houses, grappling with drug dreams and hallucinations.

Today, he's in a 12-step program for addiction recovery and meets with a mental health counselor. He attends church and volunteers at a soup kitchen. His latest project, he said, is learning how to read and write.

"When I first came to Easterseals, the only thing I knew how to do is sign my name," he said. "Now with my tutor, I'm at a first-grade reading level."

Patterson shares the townhouse with three other men, each of whom has undergone a transformation unbeknownst to their neighbors. One is Ted Keating, a 28-year-old Matawan native who has social anxiety.

Keating was in and out of hospitals while he attended community college. He obtained an associate's degree in psychology from Brookdale Community College but found himself grappling with his anxiety. At his worse, he said, he thought the TV was talking to him.

After Keating entered Easterseals, he started reading self-help books and meditating.

"I get that compulsive thinking, but I had to realize I'm not the compulsive thinking," Keating said.

Managing those feelings came in handy at work, Keating said. He works as a dishwasher at an assisted living

facility. In the past, Keating said he constantly worried he wasn't working fast enough.

Dealing with that anxiety has become easier, Keating said, and he plans to start a new job soon as a tutor.

Robert Pirerra, 41, originally from Robinsville, was in and out of psychiatric hospitals for nearly 20 years before joining Easterseals in 2013. Pirerra has undergone treatment for depression as well as obsessive compulsive disorder and impulse control.

He said he has made the greatest improvement at this group home, learning to manage his emotions, do chores and take his medication regularly.

"They teach you responsibilities. They help you with your self-esteem, confidence building," he said. "If you ever have a problem, they could always talk to you."

Pirerra, Keating and Patterson all strive toward the same goal: living on their own. (Another resident of the group home declined to be interviewed.)

"Easterseals taught me to be responsible . . . you have to learn to shower, clean up, do your chores, stuff like that," Patterson said. "I think I've been doing that pretty good."

He said he hopes someone to live on his own.

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Dwayne Patterson, 57, says the Easter Seals group home managers have helped him overcome addiction and manage mental illness. STEPH SOLIS/ASBURY PARK PRESS