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Why cameras belong in NJ's group homes for the disabled | Opinion

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Steve Setteducati Special to the USA TODAY Network

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Families who place a loved one in a group home in New Jersey are demonstrating an act of profound trust. They are asking for transparency, accountability and reassurance from the agency that runs the home and they have reasonable expectations that someone is always looking out for their family member's well-being.

At New Concepts for Living, or NCFL, we believe that trust must be earned every day. That is why we have invested heavily in visible, high-tech cameras in [our community residences in Bergen County](#), transportation vehicles and day program facilities in Paramus and Rochelle Park.

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Cameras deter abuse and neglect

These monitoring systems are designed to support our staff in many ways, but most importantly, to deter and prevent instances of abuse or neglect. They ensure that when challenges arise — as they sometimes do in high-needs environments — help and accountability are immediate.

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For training purposes, cameras are advantageous because we can identify the antecedent to a particular incident, and how it was handled. That is invaluable when working with individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities — I/DD — in efforts to minimize future negative behaviors. The footage can help us identify what strategies are most effective for a specific individual, benefiting both the residents and our staff.

In addition, when an adult with I/DD is having a significant behavioral challenge in their community home at 3 a.m., an overnight staff member can contact an on-call behaviorist and within minutes, or even seconds in some cases, get assistance to de-escalate a situation, because our behaviorist can assess the scene live through our electronic monitoring system.

Perhaps more importantly, electronic monitoring systems that include both video and audio can protect residents, especially those who are non-verbal, from abuse and neglect. All staff are aware of the presence of cameras and our ability to look back and view all activity in our vans, day programs and common areas of our homes at any time. They are a deterrent to any questionable behavior by staff.

If there is an incident, having these recordings enables us to see exactly what occurred and hold staff accountable when necessary. Monitoring devices also ensure that overnight staff in our homes do not sleep on the job and remain awake and vigilant.

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New Jersey can make more progress

Despite the obvious benefits, electronic monitoring systems are not currently standard practice in most group homes across New Jersey. However, [legislation currently pending in the state Legislature — A2705/S1172](#) — would require group

homes licensed by the state Division of Developmental Disabilities, or DDD, to install electronic monitoring systems in common areas with guardian consent.

The bills call for cameras in common living areas such as dining areas, entrances, outdoor areas and stairwells. It requires camera footage to be held for 90 days.

For the last 10 years, NCFL has used electronic monitoring, with more than 1,400 cameras installed, operational across all of our facilities, homes and transportation fleet. We consider ourselves at the forefront in our industry by offering our residents, their families and our staff peace of mind knowing that they are being monitored for protection against abuse, neglect and any false accusations.

While we hear objections from some that cameras raise concerns about privacy, through my engagement with well over 500 families, I have never met a parent or guardian who did not want cameras in the common areas of their loved one's home.

The presence of cameras is crucial for individuals who cannot advocate for themselves. The initial investment is well worth the reassurance and numerous other benefits they offer.

If a situation were to warrant an investigation by the state Department of Human Services, we would promptly review the camera footage to gain a clear and accurate understanding of what occurred. When requested, NCFL gladly provides footage to state DDD investigators.

As one of New Jersey's premier providers of services for I/DD individuals, NCFL's highest priority is to serve our residents with dignity, respect and safety, and to maintain the trust and confidence placed in us by their families. For these reasons, with minor modifications, we strongly support the proposed legislation.

Establishing clear, uniform standards for monitoring systems in common areas of group homes will raise the level of safety and accountability of I/DD providers across New Jersey. Families deserve to know that wherever their loved ones live, transparency and protection are not optional.

In a field that should strive to maintain dignity and provide proper care for one of our most vulnerable populations, the question is not whether we should use electronic monitoring systems but whether we can afford not to.

Steve Setteducati is the CEO of New Concepts for Living, a Paramus-based provider of services for intellectually and developmentally disabled adults in New Jersey.