

Cuts may close LI homes for troubled teens

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The number of group homes for troubled and at-risk teenagers on [Long Island](#) will be reduced next year, as a result of cutbacks at New York City's agency for foster children.

MercyFirst, a [Syosset](#)-based nonprofit that operates 10 homes on [Long Island](#) and in the city, said it will have to close six of its Long Island-based homes because the city's Administration for Children's Services is cutting back on its contract with MercyFirst for the beds.

It is that contract with New York City that enables MercyFirst to run the homes and have room for Long Island teens, said Gerard McCaffery, president and chief executive. Without it, his group can't afford to run the homes because [Nassau](#) and [Suffolk](#) don't have enough children in the system on its own to fill them.

About 70 percent of the teenagers who fill MercyFirst's homes are from the city, and the rest come from [Nassau](#) and [Suffolk](#)'s social services departments, and probation and family courts, McCaffery said.

"We're not going to be able to sustain those programs if we don't have kids being placed by the city," he said. "There's no way we can maintain all those beds with just Nassau and Suffolk kids at this point."

There are 57 Nassau teens and 38 from Suffolk in group homes, according to the social services departments in each county. MercyFirst currently serves seven Nassau children and 10 Suffolk children in the six affected Long Island homes.

Nassau County DSS spokeswoman Karen Garber said the county would seek out other agencies in which to place children if MercyFirst's homes close. Suffolk County social services commissioner Gregory Blass praised MercyFirst's homes, but said the county also would place children elsewhere.

While there are group homes run by other Long Island agencies that are not affected by the ACS cutbacks, social services providers and some county officials on Long Island said the closures will mean a reduction in the number of specialized group homes on Long Island.

"Different group homes provide different types of services," said John Desmond, probation director with the Suffolk County Probation Department. "So reductions like this can make it more difficult to provide the right service to the right child."

The six MercyFirst homes slated to close are in [Bay Shore](#), Baywood, [Brentwood](#), [Brightwaters](#), [Deer Park](#) and East Massapequa. Two are homes for boys, two are diagnostic homes that house teenage girls while providers determine the best placement, one is for teenaged mothers of small children, and one is for hard-to-place girls.

In a statement, ACS spokeswoman Laura Postiglione said her agency's move is part of its efforts to place more children with foster families instead of in group homes.

"Based on long-term research, children have better outcomes in foster care when they are placed with a committed and caring family," she said.

But many social services experts agree that some children do better in a group home, which is staffed around the clock and can provide more immediate access to services.

"These are kids who have been abused, neglected, traumatized; some have been sexually abused," McCaffery said. "They're great kids, but they have been through hell in a very short period in their lives. It's not like you can just plop a kid in a foster family and say, 'Be well.' "

The closings concern David Hegarty, executive director of Hope For Youth, an [Amityville](#) nonprofit that runs four group homes and three diagnostic and emergency placement programs on Long Island.

Hegarty said any group homes that close would probably not be replaced because of the high cost of housing and the likely opposition of neighbors at a potential site.

"Every time we lose one of those resources, it's a resource we're probably not going to be able to put back into the system," he said. "Over time, it may reduce the options that Nassau and Suffolk County have in terms of making placements for kids on Long Island."

Taking a tally at group homes

Number of teens Nassau County [Department of Social Services](#) has in group homes:
57

Number of teens Suffolk County [Department of Social Services](#) has in group homes: 38

Combined number of teens from both counties in MercyFirst group homes: 17

Number of homes MercyFirst is planning to close after March 2011: 6

Total number of beds in those six homes: 47 (includes three beds for the children of teenaged mothers at the [Deer Park](#) home)

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