

reasonable rant

Give sober living chance to thrive

By Thom Senzee

Proposed legislation to restrict the number of sober-living houses in Los Angeles will result in fewer housing options for addicts and alcoholics who have just completed rehab programs.

In fact, without the option of moving into a sober-living home, some addicts will undoubtedly return to their old stomping grounds — and to the lives from which they went into rehab in order to escape in the first place.

The idea behind sober-living homes is to bring people together under one roof with a common purpose. The purpose is to stay sober, and the roof is one under which a relapse means an eviction notice.

But Los Angeles City Councilman Greig Smith does not buy into sober-living homes. Smith is seeking legislation to regulate sober-living homes and all other group homes in the city after some San Fernando Valley residents complained about crimes and public nuisance they thought were associated with the homes.

"There is no difference between sober-livings and half-way houses," he said during a recent interview. "They are very detrimental to communities."

Outside a neighborhood council meeting in 2004 Smith was more explicit.

"Not only will I not help you," Smith said as he wagged a finger at a constituent named Claude Eichar, sub-chairman of the San Fernando Valley Sober Living Coalition. "I will use the full power of my office to stop you and your kind."

What Smith meant by "kind" is owners of sober-living homes. Eichar owns three and says his self-governed sober-living homes work for recovering addicts.

Sober-living houses teach people who have lived largely irresponsible lives how to do the things they do not teach in rehab, things such as paying bills on time, showing up on time, and taking care of a household.

Some houses conduct urinalysis tests to ensure everyone is clean. There is also pressure to attend 12-step meetings, as well as a basic application of the "buddy system," in which residents watch out for one another and let one another know when they are skirting the rules.

"If you goof up, you face a house council — pretty tough guys, including some ex-cons," he said. "They say 'you gotta leave,' and you leave!"

Contrary to a common misconception that sober-living facilities are populated by men fresh out of prison, most come from rehab centers where they were free to leave any time they wanted.

Eichar says sober-living homes are good for communities. According to one study cited by the American Planning Association, 18 of every 1,000 group home residents were likely to commit a crime, as compared to 112 of every 1,000 among the general population.

However, a Los Angeles Police Department crime map at a recent town hall meeting in Northridge seemed to contradict Eichar's claim. A scattered array of dots on the map appeared to point out one clear-cut pattern of crime around a particular group home. Other clusters on the map were less convincing.

But LAPD Capt. Sean Kane pointed out that none of the dots representing group homes were sober-living homes, a fact that was obscured at the town hall meeting. The city's Planning and Land Use Management Committee is now drafting legislation that would broadly regulate licensed rehabs as well as sober-living facilities and other group homes. Once passed, any single-family home in which seven or more unrelated persons live will be considered a group home.

But lost amid the controversy surrounding sober-living homes is the fact that these homes are essentially just roommates sharing the cost of a home — which is legal. The only thing that distinguishes sober-living arrangements from other roommate situations is that alcohol is not allowed.

But that's not reassuring to some. In 2004, residents of Northridge's prestigious Sherwood Forest neighborhood learned that Eichar, the owner of sober-living houses in the San Fernando Valley had bought a place in their community and organized against him. Their harassment drove him out.

That was when he sought help from his city councilman. He wanted Smith to look into the police inspection that he thought was suspiciously contemporaneous with the Sherwood Forest incident.

The law this city is considering will not only be counterproductive, it could cost taxpayers millions in lawsuits.

The American Civil Liberties Union, which has represented sober-living clients in court, says it will do likewise in Los Angeles in order to "protect the rights of individuals" who are being unfairly singled out by municipalities acting under the cloak of regulating all group homes, most of which are already regulated by mental-health or child-protective agencies.

Regulating sober-living homes is unwise, unwarranted and could make it harder for addicts to improve their lives.

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