

Sandra Drinkwater
Winter Harbor
LD 1932

My son, referred to here as AD, is 41 years old and has been living in group homes in the State of Maine for 20 years. He was born with a rare chromosomal disorder that caused mild mental retardation, large joint abnormalities and, most debilitating, severe speech impairment to the point of being basically nonverbal. Being a smart, though clearly mentally impaired, outgoing and friendly boy, his inability to communicate with others in a meaningful way has always been a source of frustration for him, leading to outbursts, bad behaviors, anxiety and depression. Attempts at learning sign language and using a portable communication device were unsuccessful. AD has always wanted to be just one of the guys and I think saw these techniques as barriers to that. When he was about to graduate from high school at 21, his family made the difficult decision that, in order to keep him safe and to provide him with some level of independence, and also looking to the future with his parents getting older, the group home setting was the best option. Let me give you examples of why we felt safety was an issue.

When AD was 5 we moved back to my hometown, a small lobstering community on the coast. As AD got older, he started asserting his independence and went out into the town on his own. He would disappear for hours and we would need to go searching for him. Sometimes he would come back with an injury which he would blame on another child. One such injury led to his left elbow being permanently dislocated. We were never quite sure what caused these injuries and AD couldn't give us details. One summer the town was having some major road work done. AD was fascinated with the activity. He disappeared one day, I hoped in the car to look for him and soon met the foreman in his pick up driving the road and there was AD in the cab with the foreman and another worker. He was in good hands, but what about next time? Another summer during our very busy festival celebration, he walked to the town pier and asked a local fisherman if he could go out on his boat with him. The lobsterman said no because you don't have a life jacket. Unbeknownst to his father and me, he came back home, got his life jacket out of the truck, went back to the dock and spent a few hours on the ocean. Again, in good hands that time, but what about the next? Another time an older woman in town approached me on the side walk and said that she told AD that if he "flipped her off again" she'd break that finger right off. I knew she would not really do that, but what about the next person?

Suffice it to say, it got to the point where AD was either going to come to serious harm or cause harm to someone else and he would have no verbal defense when dealing with the authorities.

Through the process of obtaining group home services, it was determined that he required 2 on 1 support at all times. That status has not changed. For the past 20 years we have felt confident that he was being cared for in a safe environment in his group homes. It has not been without challenges for sure. However, his latest placement at Happy Haven has been the most stable so far. He has been there since September of 2018 and we hope that he will be able to stay there indefinitely. Everyone at the agency works hard to meet his many needs on a daily basis; taking him to various medical appointments (his family is 3 hours away), taking care of his daily personal needs, administering his many medications, preparing his meals, getting him out into the community for various events, etc. His support staff and others like them across the state provide a valuable service to the most disadvantaged individuals of our population. Without their services, I am certain that we, as his parents and legal guardian, would not have been able to continue being successful taxpayers in our community and State, and AD would not have the level of independence and care that he now enjoys.