

# Housing resources available for disabled residents

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For adults in New Jersey with developmental disabilities, the path to finding supportive housing – and the money to pay for it – has long proved complex and unwieldy.

Knowledge about what resources are out there and how to access them often comes from word of mouth, painstaking research or luck. And at a time of a sweeping shift from institutional to community-based care, advocates say the need to help people find appropriate housing is critical.

Things might get a bit easier with a new 60-page guide – [autismnj.org/housing/SHAGuide](http://autismnj.org/housing/SHAGuide) – funded by a grant from the state and federally chartered New Jersey Council on Developmental Disabilities that aims to put previously scattered information in one place.

“We’ve taken out a lot of the legwork,” said Suzanne Buchanan, executive director of Autism New Jersey, which contributed to the guide and was one of the first groups in the country to advocate on issues affecting adults living with autism.

At a media conference announcing the guide last week, advocates stressed there’s no one-size-fits-all solution for the housing and services needs of individuals with disabilities.

“Supportive housing is mainstream housing,” said Gail Levinson, executive director of the Supportive Housing Association of New Jersey. “There’s a wide variety of options that can and should be available to everyone.”

Levinson – whose group works to find public and private funding for such projects – called for more rental vouchers and funding

streams for affordable special-needs housing in the high-cost-of-living state.

Such projects can go toward a municipality’s court-ordered obligation to promote housing for people of modest means.

The issue is particularly acute in New Jersey, where state records show 120,000 adults with disabilities who receive Social Security SSI benefits at less than \$800 a month. Of those, about 41,000 receive federal or state housing assistance.

“This leaves potentially many in need and does not include the chronically homeless or those living in institutions and prisons statewide,” Levinson said following the conference.

The statewide lack of affordable-housing options for people with very low incomes has “forced many to live at home with aging parents or in substandard housing conditions,” Levinson wrote in an email.

In New Jersey, about 26,000 people with disabilities live with adult caregivers over the age of 60, said Buchanan, citing a 2013 University of Colorado report.

## Personal stories

The new guide details stories about individuals like Mary, who balances a Medicaid waiver with a State Rental Assistance Program voucher to afford living on her own in an affordable-apartment complex. “With the assistance of a Support Coordinator, Mary selected a provider agency,” reads the guide. “She interviewed and chose the direct-support professionals referred by the agency.”

Those workers help with tasks such as cooking, bathing, house-keeping, budgeting and transferring Mary from her wheelchair.

Then there’s Dan, who tried living in a home with six other men

with disabilities, but then worked with an agency to find a house-mate to share a two-bedroom apartment.

The guide also profiles Walter, a man with extreme medical and behavioral challenges who received help transitioning from living in an apartment to an intensive specialized group home.

Tom Toronto, president of Bergen County United Way and a board member of the Supportive Housing Association, said his Bergen-based group has produced more than 200 supportive units in North Jersey in the past few years. They include a recently completed project in Tenafly and ongoing projects in Clifton, Mahwah, Fort Lee and New Brunswick.

“Having a guide we can present to families as they begin to contemplate trying to make housing arrangements for young adult children is a great tool for us,” he said.

When applications for a United Way project become open, there’s always strong demand, Toronto said. More housing vouchers would help more projects be built “because funders know there is a secure rent stream for a particular project,” he said.

“The bad news is that there is still a struggle to find housing and supply housing,” Toronto said. “Even though we’ve been successful and very busy – and we’re thankful to be so – the demand for housing versus the available supply is still disproportionate.”

On April 20 at 6 p.m., organizers will host a workshop on the housing guide for individuals and their family members at the C.A.P.E. Special Services Resource Center in Paramus. Those interested may register at [surveymonkey.com/r/NYBS6XS](http://surveymonkey.com/r/NYBS6XS).

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