

Autism Plus and department failed to protect group home residents: Ombudsman

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Disability services provider Autism Plus and the Department of Health and Human Services put clients at risk by failing to move a group home resident who was accused of sexually assaulting vulnerable housemates.

The resident, identified as “Edward” in the report, was involved in a series of alleged assaults in the group home for people with disabilities from October 2014.

Despite concerns expressed by Autism Plus, the families of other residents, Victoria Police and Community Visitors, Edward remained in the group home until April 2015 when he allegedly raped and threatened to kill a fellow resident.

Ombudsman Deborah Glass said the events raised serious concerns about the suitability of Autism Plus to provide programs and care for DHHS clients. The for-profit provider received more than \$260,000 in 2014 to provide Edward with one-on-one staff to client care.

The report also raises questions about action and inaction by DHHS officials, in particular the role of Child Protection, and poor co-ordination between Child Protection and Disability Services.

The report found:

- Autism Plus expressed concern to DHHS about its ability to manage Edward but reluctantly followed DHHS’s instruction to keep him at the group home, at least in part because of fear of losing government funding.
- Autism Plus cut supervision of Edward at night from two staff members to one in contravention of his contract of care. The decision was made despite objections from staff and meant that the two-person restraint, identified by Autism Plus as a necessary response to assaults by Edward, could not be implemented at night.
- Although Edward was a DHHS client through Child Protection and Disability Services, neither area obtained a specialist risk assessment of Edward after the first alleged assault.

- Child Protection had not visited Edward for more than three years, despite his involvement in 30 incidents of alleged physical assaults, sexual assaults and behaviour, and property damage.
- Disability Services took insufficient action to ensure the plan to manage Edward's challenging behaviour was updated by Autism Plus, that medical reviews for psychiatric drugs were completed, or that his carers were trained to respond to sexual assault and to predict assaultive behaviour.

Ms Glass said individuals and systems had failed Edward, other group home residents, day program users and their families. In some cases, the families of affected clients were informed about sexual assault allegations for the first time during the course of the Ombudsman's investigation.

"Residents at the group home were not protected from harm and Edward, a vulnerable child with complex needs, was not provided with alternative accommodation or intervention services when he needed them to ensure his best interests," Ms Glass said.

"This case is especially shocking – not only because of the enduring impact of the trauma associated with sexual assault, or the acute vulnerability of those involved, but that this could still happen today despite the supports available to people with a disability.

"I have in previous reports expressed concerns about the safeguards available to people with disability, and that the extreme vulnerability of some people will not lessen with the introduction of the National Disability Insurance Scheme.

"Oversight is needed for all facilities, not least when the provider has a profit motive. Over 5,000 people with disability live in supported accommodation in Victoria; the department owes it to them, indeed to our need to be a humane society, to do better."

Report: [Investigation into the management and protection of disability group home residents by the Department of Health and Human Services and Autism Plus.](#)

Note to editors: due to the nature of protected disclosures, the Ombudsman is not available for interview.

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