

# The last resort: boarding homes stand between mentally ill and homelessness



Heaven's Place, a boarding home in Woodlawn, has flunked three inspections since 2010, but never received any fines. (Amy Yurkanin|ayurkanin@al.com)



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**Editor's note: This is the latest in an ongoing [AL.com](#) investigation into the mental health crisis in Alabama.**

Shirley Komer had a hard life. She struggled with mental illness, alcohol and drug addiction, diseases that sent her to the intensive care unit at the now-closed Carraway Medical Center about 10 years ago.

As she recovered and prepared to leave in 2006, a hospital social worker referred the 64-year-old to a boarding home operated by Wanda Pullom, who owned several in and around Birmingham.

Over the last several decades, small boarding homes have opened around Alabama, replacing large state-run psychiatric hospitals by providing housing and meals for people who are disabled or mentally ill. Few are staffed with professionals and none outside Jefferson County are inspected. Even inside of Jefferson County, the regulations are lax enough that Pullom was allowed to have a permit despite convictions for forgery and theft.

Komer didn't know about those convictions when she checked out Pullom's home and decided to move in – a decision that nearly bankrupted and killed her.

Her son, K.C. Komer, noticed that his mother moved frequently from house to house, relocating four times in less than a year. Then he saw a bowl of condoms sitting out on a counter. But other residents seemed happy and well-cared-for, so he thought his mother was too, K.C. Komer wrote in an email.

"At the time I was an area manager for a company that cleaned nursing homes, responsible for 30 homes," he wrote. "I definitely am well versed in what to look for as far as residents' rights, abuse, etc. They really fooled me."

Pullom, who ran the home, soon took control of Shirley Komer's finances, drained her savings and neglected her care so thoroughly that she wound up back in the hospital in October 2006 with infected bedsores and a dislocated hip, weighing just 80 pounds, according to criminal records. Court records indicate that Pullom and her husband stole nearly \$60,000.

Julia Smeds Roth, an attorney now based in Decatur who worked as a Jefferson County conservator back then, got access to Komer's financial records.

"It was one of the worst cases I've ever seen," she said.

Pullom and her husband both pleaded guilty to theft by deception in 2009 and spent several months behind bars. The case played out in the pages of the Birmingham News. Komer moved to a nursing home where she spent the next several years before she died in 2014.

After the crimes came to light, the sheriff's department raided and shut down three of her five homes, relocating 15 residents.

But at least one of her licensed homes had a different fate – it passed into the hands of a woman who appears to be Pullom's daughter, Shermetta Holcombe. An investigation report from Pullom's criminal case file lists Shermetta Holcombe as a member of her immediate family. Holcombe has had her own trouble with the law, and pleaded guilty in 2014 to illegal possession of marijuana.

None of that bars Holcombe from operating a boarding home in Jefferson County, which is the only county in the state that even regulates these types of homes.

Outside of Jefferson County, boarding homes operate with no standards for ownership, care and cleanliness. In Jefferson County, they are regulated by the local health department, which means patients released from a hospital can be placed directly in a licensed boarding home.

Critics say Jefferson County's regulations are so lax that licensed boarding homes rarely face punishment for serious violations that include lack of food, unsanitary conditions and overcrowding. Only a short list of serious crimes including physical abuse, neglect, sexual abuse, murder, manslaughter and kidnapping specifically block a person from opening a home. Owners must undergo a background check, and take a five-hour class, but they do not need any training in nursing or mental health care.

Jimmy Walsh, president of the National Alliance on Mental Illness-Alabama, works with families all across the state grappling with serious mental illness. He said the low standards have led to deplorable conditions in many facilities.

"Boarding home? I wouldn't let a cockroach live in one," he said.

### **Many violations, zero fines**

Heaven's Place operates out of a rambling two-story house in Woodlawn. Planks of wood fitted between pillars enclose the porch. The house next door has been gutted by fire and the lot across the street is choked with weeds.

The house is permitted to hold 14 residents, although it has been cited twice for exceeding that number. In 2010, inspectors found all bedrooms full, plus a couple sleeping on the sofa and another person living in the sitting room, bringing the number up to 17.

The old house – which was built almost 90 years ago – has plumbing problems too, according to reports. The hot water has been out in the kitchen during an inspection, and another inspector noted a busted pipe.

Between December 2010 and June 2012, the boarding home flunked inspections three times, posting scores of 50, 48 and 52. Inspectors found flies and live roaches, disconnected gas, expired fire extinguishers and extension cords run between rooms.

A woman who answered the door at Heaven's Place and identified herself as a staff member referred all questions to Holcombe, who did not return multiple messages.

Failure to comply with Jefferson County Health Department regulations of boarding homes is a Class A misdemeanor punishable by a fine of up to \$2,000. That punishment has never been levied against Heaven's Place or any other boarding home licensed in the county, said Bruce Braden, environmental health program manager for the Jefferson County Department of Health.

Braden said his office is not like the police department and is unequipped to fine people for legal violations. Regulations on restaurants set clear guidelines for emergency closures and follow-up inspections, while those for boarding homes do not, leaving the interpretation in the hands of inspectors.

"Unlike the food inspection scores, there's nothing in the communal living regulations that triggers anything," Braden said. "So there's no failing."

He said his department is primarily geared to carry out food inspections – which are the core of its mission. The communal living program, which includes boarding and rooming homes that don't provide food, consists on a budget of less than \$100,000 a year for about 60 facilities.

"We're food inspectors," Braden said. "That's our main goal and accounts for about 95 percent of our work. Boarding homes are mixed in with the rest of it. There's probably a disproportionate amount of time that goes into trying to resolve boarding home issues."

The health department has received 25 boarding home complaints so far this year, including seven against a single facility – Peaceful Living Home in Collegeville. In addition to complaints about bedbugs and roaches, one caller said there had been an alarming epidemic of sudden death. In the span of a year and a half, five people died at the home, which holds 15 residents. According to the coroner's office, all of them died from natural causes.

The health department isn't equipped to judge whether boarding homes are providing proper care for vulnerable citizens, Braden said. His brother had mental illness and finding housing was not always easy.

"I always hated the thought that I might have to put him in a boarding home," Braden said. "Fortunately, I never had to do that."

### **Boarding homes or homelessness**

There is a desperate need for housing for people with mental illness.

"Housing is one of the state's critical gaps," read an application for federal funds filed by the Alabama Department of Mental Health. An individual relying on a small monthly disability payment can't afford to rent a one-bedroom apartment in most Alabama cities.

That's where boarding homes come in. Operators typically charge between \$600 and \$800 a month for shared or private rooms plus meals. Operators often take control of residents' disability checks and deduct rent and other costs before distributing the remainder to the recipient. Monthly disability checks provide a reliable source of income, and unscrupulous operators may overcrowd homes and skimp on food to maximize profits.

Between 2011 and 2016, 26 percent of people discharged from psychiatric facilities landed in a boarding home, according to Karen Fowler of Jefferson-Blount-St. Clair Mental Health Authority. By comparison, only 15 percent wound up in group homes that are staffed with professionals and regulated by the Alabama Department of Mental Health.

There aren't enough beds in group homes or supportive apartments to house all of the people with mental illness who need specialized housing, so social workers often turn to boarding homes.

"Without the boarding home bed availability, many of them would be homeless," said Richard Craig, executive director of Jefferson-Blount-St. Clair Mental Health Authority.

But families seeking housing say that even the best boarding homes don't offer the kinds of services necessary to stabilize people with mental illness. Owners aren't required to provide transportation to medical or psychiatric appointments, and although medications are supposed to be safely stored, operators don't have to keep a medication log. At least one person who works with mentally ill residents said she has seen residents develop pneumonia after they couldn't access basic medical care.

## There's nothing in the communal living regulations that triggers anything. So there's no failing.

One mother who wanted to remain anonymous said a Birmingham hospital discharged her son to a boarding home after a two-week hospitalization. For dinner, the owner provided one large takeout pizza for seven adult men.

"They never had enough to eat," she said. "The bathroom was absolutely filthy. He said it was so bad you couldn't even get in the shower. The washing machine didn't work. Nothing worked. He said he actually fixed the washing machine while he was there."

Her son got in a fight with another resident three days after he moved in and wound up back in the hospital. The hospital then sent him to a homeless shelter.

Another woman who was seeking a place for her daughter received a referral to a boarding home in rural west Jefferson County. She was shocked to find a cramped facility in poor repair, far from bus lines and counseling centers.

"There was no way I was going to leave my daughter in that place," she wrote in an email. "It was terribly, terribly depressing. It would leave [my daughter] in abject poverty, dependent on [the owner] and her family."

### 'I don't want to be here'

In the first six months of this year, emergency services in Birmingham received more than 50 calls for service from Heaven's Place – most of them mental health calls.

When boarding home residents call the police to complain, Birmingham's community service officers often respond. These social workers who work for the police department handle the bulk of mental health calls. On an evening in early August, community service officer Granville Andrews III worked his shift.

The day before, a resident of a boarding home just north of downtown Birmingham called police to complain about his money.

The man, James, was agitated and complained that he only got \$30 every week from the owners from his \$930 monthly check. The man then said he used that money to buy his own food because he didn't get enough to eat at the house.

It was difficult to make out what he said. He shook and slurred his speech as he sat in a rickety chair on the front porch of a rambling old house. He wanted to move, and urged Andrews to call his sister. It took him several minutes to fish her number – written on a crumpled piece of paper – out of his pants' pocket.

"I don't want to be here," he said.

Inside, Granville noticed that the kitchen was locked, and that the lone staff member kept a vending machine in his room. But as it turned out, the owners weren't doing anything improper with the money, since all the deductions left just \$120 from James' \$930 check.

The next home had just two residents, below the threshold for a license under the county regulations. Two men, both nonverbal,

shuffled into the living room for a welfare check. The police department recently received a call complaining that a resident had been left unattended. One of the residents, an elderly man using a walker, mutely held up an arm bloodied below the elbow.

His caretaker said he fell on his way back from a haircut, and she rushed to bandage the wound.

Even in Jefferson County, unlicensed homes continue to exist. Some are too small and others either aren't aware of regulations or choose to operate outside the law. Although hospitals cannot discharge patients to unlicensed homes, individuals may move in after leaving a family home or another facility. There is little authorities can do to punish unlicensed proprietors who fail to provide healthy food or safe accommodations.

Andrews recently found three mentally-disabled residents living without electricity and running water in an unlicensed home. He said the owner faced no penalties for the squalid conditions.

Braden said all he can do in those situations is send the owner an application to become a licensed facility and bring them in line with standards for sanitation. Andrews can only refer clients to different facilities – unless he can find evidence of abuse or neglect.

"It's frustrating because there's nothing I can do," Andrews said. "People deserve better than this."

Among licensed facilities, there are some that provide good services to residents. And residents have the right to choose where they live, he said. The three men recently removed from the unlicensed home without electricity and running water returned within a week, Braden said.

"It was home to them," he said. "Our role is not to place people in the homes. We regulate restaurants too, but we don't tell you where to go eat."



## Alabama sheriffs say state facing mental health crisis

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