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## Maryland Community News

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**Sandy Spring group home faces closure** *by [Sylvia Carignan](#) Staff writer*

Upstairs, in an orderly Sandy Spring home, a bedroom doorway reveals two twin beds covered with comforters in cartoonish bulldozer and truck prints. In the next room, a dozen pairs of neon Adidas sneakers poke out from underneath another neatly made bed.

The boys who sleep in these beds are refugees from a succession of foster homes. When they arrive at Aunt Hattie's Place, a group home for boys, they find a supportive community and a neighborhood that has grown to respect them.

But the state's Department of Human Resources determined in April that the eight beds in Aunt Hattie's Place are no longer necessary. The department denied the program's request to renew a contract that would have helped founder Hattie Washington keep the group home open for the next three years.

Now, the group home is heading toward almost certain closure at the end of June. While the program's staff and volunteers work to move the eight boys out of the home, Washington fights to appeal the state's decision.

"The decrease in the number of beds awarded is due to the success of the Department [of Human Resources]' 'Place Matters' initiative," according to a press release from the state.

Group homes are one of six types of placements for residential child care beds in Maryland. High-intensity group homes, psychiatric residential homes and homes for the developmentally disabled, for example, all are allocated funding from the state for beds.

A group home, like Aunt Hattie's Place, is a residence with staff who provide care and services to people in specific age groups, with specific needs. Washington provides care for boys up to age 18 who may have mental disabilities, though all came from foster homes or have been removed from their own homes.

Over the past five years, the state has reduced the number of beds in group homes by 67 percent, the release said. The number declined from about 1,890 beds to 620 across the state.

The state's new initiative assesses care providers through "performance-based

measures” and strives to keep children in their homes, offering more community services to make that possible.

Aunt Hattie’s Place is one of 11 group homes in Montgomery County. Without state funding, several will be slated to close by July 1; state figures on exactly how many and which ones were not available. Like Washington’s group home, their contracts with the state were not renewed.

In a letter to the state Department of Human Resources dated April 25, Montgomery County Executive Isiah Leggett wrote that moving children out of the group homes “will be very traumatic ... and disruptive to their educational and reunification goals.”

At Aunt Hattie’s Place, the boys receive counseling and help with their homework. Some require therapy, and some need encouragement to make that B an A-plus, Washington said. A few have made the honor roll at their respective schools, and two recently graduated from Sherwood High School.

Washington has reached out to local, county and state officials to get their support to keep the home open. Several representatives from Montgomery County have written letters to the state in support of the home, she said.

Emily Vaias, a lawyer with the Linowes and Blocher law firm, has worked pro bono for Aunt Hattie’s Place since before the opening of the Sandy Spring home. She believes the “Place Matters” initiative “is more simply a policy shift and trying to focus on individual foster homes instead of group homes,” she said.

Washington believes the state is cutting beds to save money. The contracts issued in 2013 will cost the state \$191,883,825 over the next three years, according to the state release.

“It’s unfortunate that they’re balancing the budget on the backs of foster kids,” Washington said.

In the Sandy Spring group home, poster boards and photos cover one wall of the living room-turned-conference room. There are photos and mementos of Robert H. Hill, the first African-American man to sit on the board of Sandy Spring Bank, a former Negro League baseball player and housing developer. Hill, a man known for his generosity to the community, bequeathed his five-car garage to Washington in 2000.

She started building a group home on the site in 2004, and after years of construction, opened the place in 2010.

Washington said Aunt Hattie's Place had a ten-year covenant with the county: If the county agreed to help fund the home's construction, she would agree to keep it open for the next ten years. The home cost about \$3 million, The Gazette previously reported.

She said the closure of the home—a "shameful" outcome—is a waste of taxpayers' money.

Though the state is not requiring Aunt Hattie's Place to close, Washington said the lack of substantial state funding will force its closure.

If Aunt Hattie's Place cannot continue to operate as a group home, Washington said she would use the home as an "emergency transitional home for foster children" who are waiting to be placed in a foster home. Her proposal has been met with silence from the state Department of Human Resources.

For now, Washington and Vaias are hoping their appeal will help the state reverse its decision, but they are left with few options.

"The county has been instructed to begin moving the children, and that has begun," Vaias said. "To our dismay, they were doing it rather quickly. They could have waited until school was out, at least."

Only six of the beds are occupied now, and two more boys are scheduled to move out in the next two weeks, Vaias said.

In the conference room at Aunt Hattie's Place, one of the boys shuffles in to greet Washington with a kiss on the cheek. He mumbles out a sentence, but Washington stops him — until he remembers to say "ma'am."

All of the home's residents will have to move out this summer, unless the state reverses its decision. Some of the boys will be moved to group homes in other counties.

"This is home for these kids," Washington said. "They need constant attention and care. I'm just so concerned that they're not going to be able to make it."

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