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Autistic man from Queens suffered years of abuse at group home: lawsuit



Cellphone video shows the moment a Queens group home employee kicks a non-verbal autistic resident, according to a new federal lawsuit. (Emery Celli Brinckerhoff Abady Ward & Maazel LLP)



By **JOHN ANNESE** | JANNESE@nydailynews.com | New York Daily News

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A non-verbal autistic man from Queens suffered years of beatings and abuse by the staff of the group home that was supposed to take care of him — even after a video of his treatment [made the news in 2023](#), according to a new federal lawsuit.

The man, identified by his initials, J.P., was living in an East Islip group home run by [the nonprofit Life's WORC network](#), and the lawsuit describes a house of horrors where staff repeatedly punched and kicked him and invented incidents where he'd hit himself in the head so they could keep him in a drugged, "zombie-like" state.

"I want justice and accountability," J.P.'s mother, who goes by her initials, V.T., to protect her son's identity, told the Daily News. "My son is a human being. No one should be treated that way, or spoken to (that way). No one should raise their hand to anyone. He's a disabled man."

Staff would tie his shirt sleeves to restrain him like he was wearing a straight jacket, gripped him so tightly he bruised, and didn't keep him properly dressed and groomed, [according to the suit](#). Some staff members also smoked pot on the job, and left some weed between two couch cushions in the group home, the suit alleges.



In one disturbing episode in February 2024, J.P. had to be hospitalized for 20

“What’s so challenging is that J.P. cannot speak for himself. He can’t advocate for himself. He can’t report what’s happening to him,” said his family’s lawyer, Ilann Maazel of Emery Celli Brinckerhoff Abady Ward & Maazel LLP. “This is the challenge. We’re never going to have complete information.”



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The suit, filed by J.P.’s mother in Brooklyn Federal Court, lays out a pattern of abuse that went on for roughly two years, despite the efforts of three concerned staffers turned whistleblowers who reported what they saw, to no avail, to their supervisors.

“Rather than receiving the dignity and safety required by federal and New York State law, J.P. was subjected to repeated physical assaults, emotional abuse, chronic over-medication so that staff could avoid ‘dealing’ with his disabilities, willful neglect, and institutional cover-ups by both staff and upper-level management at Life’s WORC,” the lawsuit reads.



Photos included in lawsuit show the autistic man after he was hospitalized (left) and also strapped to a wheelchair (right).

J.P.'s mother said she placed her son into the group home in 2019, because she needed help caring for him after her husband died. She noticed something was awry when he came home for visits, but didn't expect physical abuse.

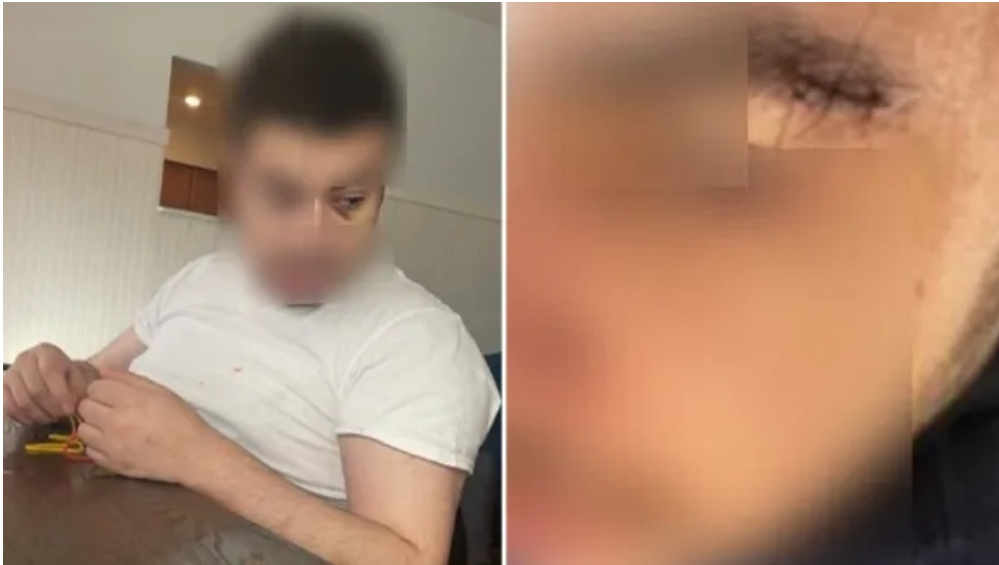
"I would notice that he'd come very lethargic, always drooling... and just would stare at me," V.T. said. "He would struggle to hold his head up, or he would just sit slumped over."

That was a surprise, she said, because he was normally enthusiastic about activities such as going shopping or to the beach. Once, he was so unresponsive that she called for an ambulance, and the home visits stopped after that, she said.

The lawsuit alleges that staff manipulated records and write up false reports that J.P. was hitting himself to justify over-medicating him, with administrators telling one of the whistleblowers to "write anything, it doesn't matter" in their logs.

The physical abuse started as early as October 2022, when a worker punched J.P. in the ribs, and received a brief suspension as a result, the lawsuit alleges.

Other incidents followed, and in February 2023, one of the group home's autism support professionals, Bryan Amegah, was videotaped kicking him in



Photos included in lawsuit show the autistic man with a black eye (left) and also stitches over his left eye (right).

One of the concerned staffers reported the assault to Tiffany LaBoy and Vanessa Rodriguez, the group home's residential manager and assistant residential manager, but the duo didn't discipline Amegah, attributing what happened to "burnout" and mental health issues, according to the suit.

The three whistleblowers saw multiple incidents involving J.P. and other residents, and by the summer of 2023, videos started circulating among the staff, according to the suit.

LaBoy, the Director of Residential Services Ayodele Adewunmi, and Senior Vice President of Residential Services Andrea DiVita tried to mollify the parents of residents who got copies of the videos and tried to track down their source, according to the suit.

Adewunmi and DiVita even went as far as forcing two of the concerned staffers to delete the videos from their phones, and from their "recently deleted" folder, while they watched, the suit alleges.

But the genie had gotten out of the bottle, and News 12 Long Island ran a story on June 5, 2023.

V.T. said she got a call shortly before the TV story aired, from an administrator who warned her she was going to see a video of J.P. "getting hit."

The distraught mom said she started looking for a new group home, but it took more than a year to finally find an appropriate place for her son. A doctor has diagnosed him with post-traumatic stress disorder because of his ordeal, the suit alleges.

"He's much better, but he's still, like, there's a lot of things that we still have to work on," V.T. "As a mom, I have guilt myself that I couldn't help him sooner. "You know, I researched. I thought I made a right choice, but I guess not."

Representatives of Life's WORC did not return several messages seeking comment, and attempts to reach several of the named defendants were unsuccessful. LaBoy and Adewunmi both declined comment when reached by The News.

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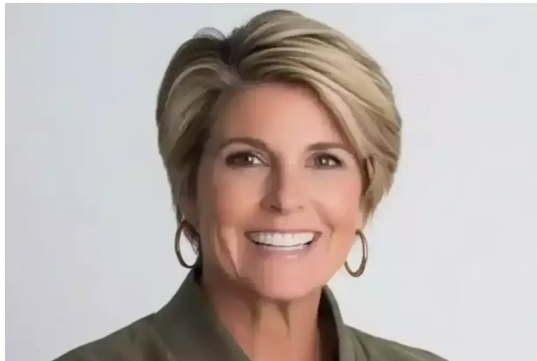
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