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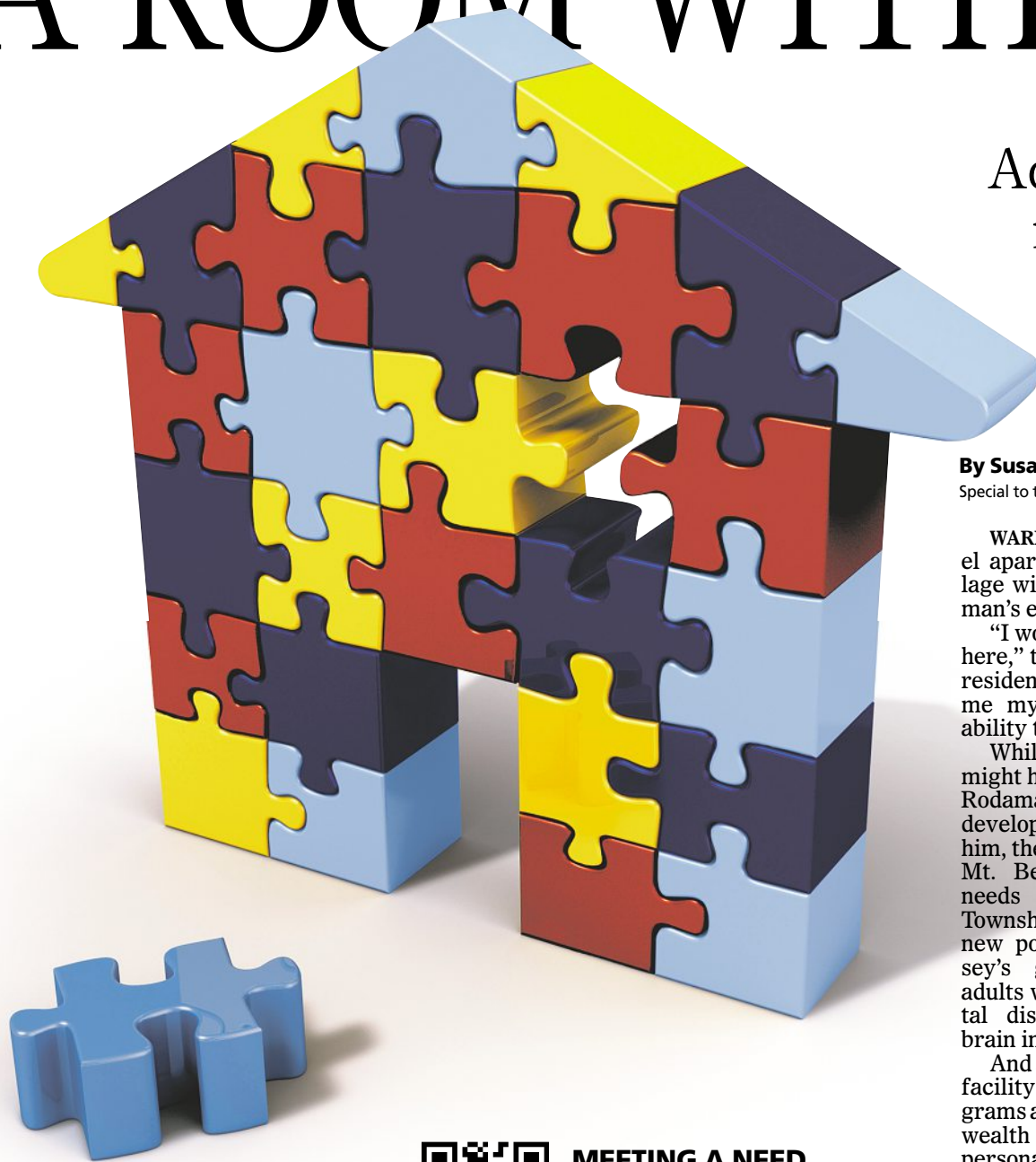
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Adults with special needs find more opportunities, freedom living in Warren at newly opened Mt. Bethel Village

By Susan Bloom
Special to the Courier News

WARREN—Peering into a model apartment at Mt. Bethel Village with his father, Matt Rodaman's eyes light up.

"I would really like to move in here," the 36-year-old Rockaway resident nodded. "It would give me my independence and the ability to do stuff on my own."

While at one time that ability might have been out of reach for Rodaman and other adults with developmental disabilities like him, the recent grand opening of Mt. Bethel Village, a special needs community in Warren Township, has created exciting new possibilities for New Jersey's growing population of adults with autism, developmental disabilities and traumatic brain injuries.

And as its client list grows, the facility's residential and day programs are offering participants a wealth of new opportunities for personal and professional growth, socialization, team-building, and the strength and confidence that come with being part of a thriving community.



Matt Rodaman and his father Jay, both of Rockaway, explore a model apartment at Mt. Bethel Village in Warren. Matt Rodaman wants to move to the complex, a new facility offering residential and day programs to support adults with developmental disabilities. KATHY JOHNSON/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER



MEETING A NEED
Scan the QR code or visit
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on Mt. Bethel Village.

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BETHEL

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While issues surrounding future funding of facilities like Mt. Bethel Village are under discussion at the state level, their value is undisputed, officials said.

"Mt. Bethel Village is a wonderful model which affords greater opportunities for adults with developmental disabilities to live independently," Tom Kean Jr, state Senate Republican leader, said. The legislator, who toured Mt. Bethel Village in March and has worked to reduce the number of large institutions in the state — "only Texas has more people with developmental disabilities in large institutions than New Jersey" — said he supports "small to mid-range experiences that enable people with special needs to get closer to their communities."

He also backs proposed legislation like the Innovative Services for Persons with Developmental Disabilities Act, a measure which urges new approaches to housing adults with special needs in light of the state's supply shortage.

"We'll always have large institutions, but there needs to be a spectrum of care from large to small, and this is the important niche that Mt. Bethel Village seeks to fill," Kean said. "Its size and the flexibility of its day and residential components are its hallmark."

A concept is born

Though Mt. Bethel Village opened its doors this past January, the bright and well-appointed facility was conceived in 2001.

"The concept was born when Chelsea Corp. opened its doors to having special-needs adults volunteer in several of its assisted-living communities," said Carolann Garafola, executive director of Mt. Bethel Village and former five-time mayor of Warren Township. "Some of the executives and physicians behind Chelsea Senior Living were parents of special-needs children themselves and agreed that there was a need for housing that created a community for adults on the autism spectrum."

Working with the Township Committee, of which Garafola has been a long-time member, the team envisioned a community where low-moderate to high-functioning adults with developmental disabilities could live semi-independently, and construction of Mt. Bethel Village was approved six years ago.

"Adults with special needs know they're different, but they want to be like everyone else, with their own apartment and friends," Garafola said. "Mt. Bethel Village gives them that opportunity but with the support of adult supervision 24-7 if necessary."

According to Garafola, the meteoric rise in the incidence of developmental disabilities like autism over the past one to two decades (see sidebar) combined with the passage of time has led to what has been described as a "tsunami" of disabled adults exiting school systems nationwide and in need of housing.

"Recent reports show that there are over 220,000 adults with autism seeking housing across the country, 8,000 of them right here in New Jersey," Garafola said. "Their parents are aging or passing away too, which has left remaining family members — many of whom don't have a full grasp of or the ability to take on the tremendous responsibilities associated with caring for a family member with special needs — wondering what to do."

For this reason, she said, facilities like Mt. Bethel Village are critical.

"Among our families' primary concerns are that their loved ones are safe and have access to



Jay Rodaman and his son Matt, both of Rockaway, make themselves at home in a model apartment at Mt. Bethel Village, in Warren. "Matt is extremely independent, self-reliant, motivated, and well-traveled with a great work ethic, and he fits in beautifully at Mt. Bethel Village," where he is enrolled in the day program, Jay Rodaman says.

KATHY JOHNSON/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER



Mt. Bethel Village in Warren opened in January and offers both residential and day programs. The adults special needs community, which offers 24/7 supervision, can accommodate 41 individuals within 38 one and two-bedroom apartments. KATHY JOHNSON/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

social interaction; our 24-7 supervision provides that umbrella of safety and our common areas and diverse roster of group activities promote socialization," Garafola said.

What's there

Within its spacious 60,000-square-foot layout, which houses a common room with a large-screen television, a family activities room outfitted with cooking facilities, a gym, a library media room, an art room, a computer room, and a video game room, Mt. Bethel Village can accommodate 41 individuals within 38 one and two-bedroom apartments, two of which are occupied and four others will be shortly.

"There's an intake assessment process, which involves on-site visits, interviews at the family's home and with staffers, and a financial review," Garafola said. Mandatory requirements for residence are that the individual is 21 or older, has exited the school system and desires an apartment where they can close their doors but where support staffers — including teachers, recreation therapists, nurses and a Johnson & Wales-trained chef — are on hand. Staff members help make sure residents get up each morning, take a shower, take any necessary medication, have breakfast and pursue an otherwise normal pattern of life activities, "almost like surrogate parenting," Garafola said.

Residents exhibit different degrees of functionality, anywhere from limited language and reading skills to an extensive vocabulary and the ability to drive and hold part-time jobs at local stores. And though many don't have a complete range of social skills or the ability to understand social cues — requiring staffers to work with them on standard practices like shaking hands, saying hello, and not interrupting — "all of them know what it is to have fun and enjoy time with their friends, and the supervision helps keep them on track," Garafola said.

She expects all of Mt. Bethel's apartments to be

program members," he said. "It's easy to let Matt go and feel confident that he'll be safe, stimulated, and well taken care of. This is really a step forward for him."

This is the type of response the facility is seeking to engender with the families it works with, according to Gertrude Gassler, one of Mt. Bethel's direct support staffers who helps in the planning and execution of group activities for the largely autistic population.

"We try to schedule a variety of activities and field trips that cater to each participant's likes so that everyone's included," Gassler said.

"The thing I love most is the socialization they receive — they've come to count on each other to be there and look forward to seeing each other. Some were living at home

before this program and their caregivers were out working, so there was nothing for them to do and nowhere to go," she said.

"I'm overjoyed when I see them connecting to each other. They've turned this into their community."

For Garafola, who has an autistic nephew and three relatives on her father's side with other developmental disabilities, "the special needs population has always been near and dear to my heart."

This approach also can make economic sense. She said that thanks to state-sponsored, self-directed funding, the cost per person per year at Mt. Bethel for residential room and board, the day program, 24-7 support, housekeeping, transportation, and other elements ranges from \$52,000 to \$96,000, roughly half of

the \$120,000 to \$170,000 annual cost per person in a group-home setting.

"I remember moving into a garden apartment when I got out of college and wanted to extend that great feeling of independence to adults with developmental disabilities," she said. "We believe that communities like Mt. Bethel Village could be replicated all over the state."

"We've watched the successful growth of our Chelsea Senior Living communities, which have expanded to 16 locations throughout New York, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania in the past several decades," she added. "While there's nothing on the drawing board currently, we would be interested in building additional Mt. Bethel Village communities. The issue is ensuring that they're affordable for everyone."

In the end, said Jay Rodaman, "people with disabilities aren't different — they have the same goals and desires as everyone else and may get there more slowly, but they get there. We're thrilled to see that Matt feels he has a purpose in life and that he's gaining the skills to live on his own in a safe and nurturing environment."

For Gassler, the visible growth in her group's confidence, self-esteem, social skills, and sense of community is the ultimate reward. "Their diagnosis doesn't matter to me — I work with them wherever they're at and no matter what," she shared. "They're such a sincere group of people and they truly touch my heart. They're really turning into a family."

Resource

Mt. Bethel Village is at 130 Mt. Bethel Road in Warren and can be reached at 908-280-0149 or by visiting www.mtbethelvillage.com.

occupied within 18 months.

Separate from its residential accommodations, a day program, which runs from 9:30 a.m. to 3 p.m. Monday to Friday, is funded by the state's Division of Developmental Disabilities. It offers group members activities, such as arts and crafts, gym workouts, word and board games and field trips to area malls, parks, museums, and restaurants in the facility's six-passenger van and 14-passenger bus.

"Going places with their friends and getting out into the community are very important to them," Garafola said. "There are a limited number of programs in the state with openings, and the need has grown," she noted of the 18 individuals now participating in the day program and the 20 more under consideration. "We're excited to offer this new opportunity because, in the past, most adults in the program used to just stay home."

A happy place

Prior to arriving at Mt. Bethel in January, Matt Rodaman already had experienced the freedom of independent living — last year he shared an apartment in a group facility in Cedar Knolls until differences with his roommate led him to return home, a way of life which he said "has its ups and downs." Rodaman, who drives and has worked part-time at a local ShopRite for the past 18 years, began attending Mt. Bethel's day program two days a week and has never looked back.

"It's a happy place where we do arts and crafts, yoga, read books, play games, and the food is good," he said. "It's fun and the activities keep us busy morning to afternoon."

His father, Jay, 66, confirmed that "Matt is extremely independent, self-reliant, motivated, and well-traveled with a great work ethic, and he fits in beautifully at Mt. Bethel Village."

"They teach him a lot of skill sets that help him in day-to-day functioning and he really enjoys himself. The main thing is the love that the staff has for their residents and day