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**Memo:** SOUTH WEEKLY / RICK SMALL

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By Rick Small

The three-story Arlington Green Eldercare nursing home, at the corner of Arlington Street and Elmwood Avenue in the Wollaston section of Quincy, has in recent weeks undergone a metamorphosis, unwelcome by some neighbors -- at least for now.

The multiple-occupancy dwelling has become a "sober house" managed by the Twelve Step Education Program of New England, a nonprofit educational corporation. The site joins 15 other dwellings for recovering alcoholics and drug addicts operated by the organization around the state.

Five years ago, after five years as a professional counselor to substance abusers, **Phil Malonson** saw a need for safe, drug- and alcohol-free housing for people who are committed to turning their lives around.

"Some people thought I was crazy," said Malonson, founder and director of the program. "But that was 16 sober houses and 260 beds ago. We get about 30 calls a day from those who need this type of facility, or from their relatives. Every town in the state could use at least one of these places." In the last five years, approximately 3,000 people have passed through the clean-living homes on their way to re-constructing their lives.

Most of the residents are employed, all pay modest rents for room and board. They must abide by the rules of the house, including the most important -- staying completely away from alcohol and drugs. If the on-site management or counselors have probable cause, they will conduct a urine or saliva test on any resident perceived to be in violation of the rules. Eviction is a possible consequence of a positive test.

Additionally, residents are required to attend a minimum of three or four Alcoholics Anonymous or Narcotics Anonymous meetings per week -- most attend more.

Malonson, a recovering alcoholic and drug addict, 10 years clean and sober, knows the population he deals with from the inside. He has walked the same roads and stumbled over the same pitfalls. He credits family and friends with helping him on to the path of recovery. When he speaks of his uncle, Eddie Malonson, his eyes become moist, "Eddie is a father, a brother, a friend to me. Without him, and his faith in me, I'm sure I'd be dead."

Giving substance abusers the same second chance at life is what guides Malonson and his organization.

Aaron To lives across the street from the new sober living home. He is one of the neighbors who believe that this quiet street of single, two- and three-family houses is not the place for such an operation.

"I think everyone deserves a second chance," said To. "But not at someone else's expense. Walk in my shoes for awhile and you will see it as I do. They should move to some commercial area, away from families."

To and some other nearby homeowners are fearful that their new neighbors will bring drugs and crime into the area. They are also afraid that property values will tumble.

Malonson responded: "People are always wary when we start out. But we will be the best neighbors anyone could want. Give us a chance. Come in and talk to us. You'll see that our residents are trying to set things right in their lives, for themselves and their families."

Joe Finn, executive director of the Quincy Interfaith Sheltering Coalition, which oversees Father Bill's Place, has no first-hand knowledge of the Twelve Step Education Program of New England. Yet he believes that if it is properly managed it could be a real resource for the city.

"Actually, neighbors should know a drug- and alcohol-free residence is preferable to a typical boarding house that could go into that building. In a regular boarding house you may have an absentee landlord who has no real control over his renters' behavior. If responsibly handled and maintained, it will be a safe place," said Finn.

Bob Monahan, executive director of South Shore House Recovery Center in Quincy, sees a need for sober living environments for recovering alcoholics and drug users. After six months of intensive treatment, counseling, and monitoring in a facility like his, Monahan believes a transitional phase of housing would be great for his clients. Although successful completion of the Recovery Center program requires employment, living provisions are often difficult. Some



men are forced to go into homeless shelters before they can find affordable housing in our region.

"A well run sober house, or three-quarter-way house, would be a real asset to this community," said Monahan. "It could be the next, less rigid, stage of rehabilitation and back into real life for many in need of structured, substance-free living."

A few years ago, the state of California commissioned a study about the economic effects of treatment centers and rehabilitation of substance abusers. It concluded that for every dollar spent on such programs, \$7 were saved in the criminal justice system.

While the concerns of Aaron To and other neighbors of the new sober house are substantive, they must be put into perspective. There is hardly a family in this country that has not been negatively affected by alcoholism and drug abuse. The necessity for de-tox, treatment, recovery, and rehabilitation programs, of all types, continues to rise on a flood tide of sorrow and need.

Does it make sense to cast those who are trying to come back from the scourge of addiction into the uncaring streets without a second chance of support, guidance, and hope?

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