

## 'Sober house' looked at for Berwick facility

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Somersworth Bureau Chief

BERWICK, Maine — A non-profit group from Massachusetts wants to create a "sober house" at the now-defunct McGinnis Home.

Newell Auger, director of legislative and public affairs for the Maine Department of Human Services, said the last resident of the McGinnis home was moved to a new facility at the beginning of the week.

Now a recovery program wants to open in the School Street building.

Phil Malonson, founder of Twelve Step Education Program of New England, currently operates residences in nine Massachusetts communities. He said the homes are not treatment facilities, but supportive environments where newly sober people can get back on their feet.

"We're not a detox or a treatment program. We're not a half-way house," he said. "These guys are already sober and going back and forth to work and just want to live in a sober environment."

Malonson, himself a former addict, said he established his first sober home in 1992 for himself and seven other men. He said the most significant factor in addiction relapse is exposure to the same environment and his residencies create a drug and alcohol free environment.

"I was hanging around with the wrong people," he said of when he first got sober in 1988. "I was sick and tired of being

sick and tired. I got my GED and went back to school at 32, 33 years old ... I never dreamed this would turn into what it turned into. I just wanted to stay clean and sober myself. I know helping another recovering addict will help me stay sober."

Currently, the company has 270 beds in Billerica, Quincy, Saugus, Woburn, Leominster and Salem, Mass.

His move north came from learning about substance abuse problems in the area.

"I personally bought a piece of property on Sebago Lake and just reading the paper in Southern Maine and New Hampshire there is a huge drug and alcohol problem," he said.

He said he has a purchase and sales agreement for the building and he wants to answer questions and concerns from neighbors and town residents at an open house on Oct. 10 from 4 to 6 p.m., at the facility.

"Instead of just going in and doing something. I want to introduce myself to the area," he said of the open house. He spent time on Thursday talking to abutting neighbors, he said.

"There's a 'not in my backyard' thought in the beginning, but it goes away," he said of initial resistance to a new sober house. "If not in my backyard, then where? Alcohol and drugs are some of the biggest problems right now."

Right now, he is cleaning the building and grounds and said residents might move in

within a few weeks.

The program requires residents to attend at least three 12-step recovery meetings, like Alcoholics Anonymous, per week. The Berwick facility would house 39 men, he said, although he said he knows there is great demand for a women's facility.

"A lot of people from the Berwick area will be residing in the facility," he said.

In his other homes, residents pay about \$120 a week for the program which includes meals, utilities and other efficiencies. This year the other facilities have been at 98 or 99 percent occupancy, he said.

"It's getting longer and longer," Malonson said of the average resident's stay. "It used to be 3 to 6 months, now it's a year or longer. In our bylaws someone can stay up to three years, but I have people who have stayed longer."

He is currently studying the program's success rate, but said people who leave the program because of relapse or other reason often return to a 12-step program.

In Berwick, he said he heard of one Alcoholic's Anonymous meeting, but if residents need more, he said they will start them.

"I know every town has access to Alcoholic Anonymous and there's at least one meeting (in Berwick) I've heard, within walking distance," to the building he said.

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