

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/putting-real-caring-into-residential-care-facilities-for-people-with-disabilities>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

Recent media accounts have chronicled reports of alleged abuse and assault of people with disabilities in residential-care settings. These are vile stories of perpetrators caught in the act of raping residents, disturbing descriptions of people with disabilities being beaten, some even killed all while in the supposed care of a residential facility and at the hands of employees who have been hired to support them. While these articles may be difficult to read, they shed light on a problem that is often hidden from view but warrants immediate attention.

At the beginning of the year, [details emerged in Los Angeles](#) about more than 100 hours of video that surfaced depicting women with disabilities in residential-care settings being sexually assaulted by at least 10 men. Most of the attackers were believed to be employees. An anonymous tipster came forward with the video; otherwise these brutal crimes may never have been known.

[A more recent article](#) in the *New York Times* reported on a yearlong investigation of widespread abuses in New York's 2,000 state-run group homes. Not only does the *Times* account describe rape, physical abuse, and general mistreatment of people with disabilities; it reveals that employees who abuse and assault residents are rarely fired or even disciplined.

The horror of the abuse in these stories is compounded by the lack of oversight that allowed the abuse to happen in the first place. The *Times* article highlights another disturbing failure: that of the system to respond effectively to the abuse allegations once they are known. Often in these settings, allegations of abuse are handled internally by agencies that have no capacity to complete such investigations—no standard evidence-gathering techniques, no law-enforcement training, no crime lab, etc. In the *Times* investigation, less than 5 percent of the 13,000 allegations of abuse in 2009 in New York's state-run group homes were ever reported to law enforcement.

There are several questions that these articles leave me pondering. Most critically, what can we do to stop abuse of people with disabilities in residential-care facilities? When abuse does occur, why is it not considered, first and foremost, a crime and reported to law enforcement?

Through Vera's work in the [Accessing Safety Initiative](#) we've seen that victim services, disability service providers, and criminal justice representatives can join forces to create more effective, safe, and accessible services for victims with disabilities. Knowing the strength that flows from such collaboration, it's imperative to explore how we can work together to address the hidden problem of the abuse of people with disabilities in residential-care settings.

We should all be outraged at these stories. We need to do something and we need to do it now.

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