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Proposed L.A. boardinghouse crackdown worries shelter operators

A law sponsored by Councilman Mitchell Englander would impose stricter controls on group homes to improve safety, but critics warn it would hurt programs that aid the needy, ill and homeless. .

By **Laura J. Nelson**
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From a shelter in Boyle Heights, 18-year-old Abraham Magana dreams of Stanford.

Magana has been homeless for more than six months. Since he moved out of his family's house in August after escalating conflicts with his sister, he's lived in a shelter run by Jovenes Inc., a nonprofit that gives young homeless men a place to sleep.

Magana will graduate from high school in June. Then he hopes to earn straight A's at Santa Monica College, get elected to the student government and apply to transfer. When he reaches Stanford — to him it is when, not if — he will get degrees in mathematics, engineering and business.

"It's proof that you are somebody," Magana said.

Knowing he has somewhere to sleep makes school that much easier, Magana said. But the housing, counseling and support the nonprofit provides to Magana and more than 100 other young men each year could be in jeopardy, Jovenes officials say, if the L.A. City Council passes a set of controversial

regulations scheduled for a vote Wednesday.

The proposed law, sponsored by Councilman Mitch Englander, includes stricter controls on boardinghouses and group homes intended to rid neighborhoods of illegal, dangerous and overcrowded facilities. How to accomplish that has been debated for nearly two years. But resolving the question took on new urgency in December after four people died in a shooting at an unlicensed Northridge boardinghouse.

Critics warn that the restrictions would hurt shelters, sober-living houses and other programs that help an array of needy residents, including thousands of homeless people in L.A. County.

"I was frankly appalled," said Fried Wittman, a UC Berkeley professor who has studied sober-living houses for more than 25 years and wrote a letter to the council. "It's trying to accomplish a sensible purpose, but it's barking up the wrong tree."

Under the ordinance, it would be illegal for more than four people to live in the same house or apartment when not functioning as a "single housekeeping unit," meaning the members share expenses, chores and living spaces. It would also make it illegal for more than three people on probation or parole to live in the same apartment or hotel room unless landlords obtain a special permit. State-licensed facilities would be exempt.

Limiting individual leases undermines the work of homelessness and alcoholism support groups, Wittman said, because shared living spaces are more affordable for those beginning to live on their own. A personalized lease, including eviction clauses for drinking or not finding a job, teaches independence and holds tenants accountable, he said.

Adam Murray, the executive director of Inner City Law Center, said the proposed regulations would be impossible to enforce without extensive effort by city building inspectors. They would have to keep count of the number of people in each apartment, run background checks on tenants and monitor living habits to see if they share meals and finances. If the ordinance passes, it will be challenged in court, Murray says. Preventing groups of alcoholics or disabled veterans from living together, he said, appears to violate the federal Americans With Disabilities Act.

Englander said city attorneys have examined the proposed ordinance and found no problems. "It's absolutely the opposite" of what critics contend, he said. "We actually provide more opportunities and go further than any city in terms of what we offer."

Jovenes, which is partly funded by state and county agencies, operates in a former air conditioning factory on a quiet cul-de-sac near the 101 Freeway. Employees cook meals each night in a bright-yellow kitchen. In bedrooms of the emergency overnight near the 101 Freeway. Employees

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cook meals each night in a bright-yellow kitchen. In bedrooms of the emergency overnight shelter, bunk beds are made up with quilts and patterned fleece blankets. If clients attend counseling, meet curfew and follow the rules, they can stay for 90 days.

Officials say the proposed law would make some duplexes the group uses to house young men illegal. It also would prevent the organization from housing more than three parolees a night in the

shelter. Sometimes, more than half of the 12 beds are filled with men recently released from Men's Central Jail, less than a mile away.

"These guys, when they come out, they have nowhere to go," case manager Luis Medina said.

Magana stayed in the shelter for a month before moving into semi-permanent housing, where he does his calculus homework, sketches knights in futuristic armor and bickers with his roommates about who will do the dishes. He can stay

with Jovenes for a year and a half. If he still needs help after that, Jovenes could place him in one of five homes it owns in Boyle Heights, where he would pay rent.

"I don't know what I would do without them," Magana said. "You can't always stand on your own feet right away."



Jaiden Pratt is a resident at Jovenes Inc., a Boyle Heights nonprofit boarding home that provides housing and counseling for 18- to 25-year-old homeless men. (Robert Gauthier / Los Angeles Times / January 29, 2013)