



# Proposed Ordinance Over Group Homes Sparks Concern

By Jen Nowell  
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After 24 years in prison, Nannie Wilkerson has a comfortable bed to call her own, but this sense of security is being threatened as the Los Angeles City Council considers stricter regulations on group homes.

Wilkerson was released from prison last month and since her release she has been living in one of the homes connected with A New Way of Life — an agency that helps women recently released from prison.

The community care facilities ordinance, which outlines the new rules for group homes, would allow only three parolees to live in a home in a residential neighborhood, unless they are relatives.

"The question is do we want homes with 30 violent felons or sexual offenders living in communities anywhere," said Mitch Englander, who is pushing for the passage of the ordinance.

The City Council looked at a motion to pass the proposed ordinance on Jan. 30, but voted to send it to a working group chaired by Englander. It will go back to council at the end of April.

Wilkerson received 15 years to life for second degree murder. She said she knew the victim Tony Paladino, a 25-year-old homeless man who lived with Wilkerson's family.

"I went from a college girl, living out in San Diego to one bad night, and I take full responsibility for my crime," Wilkerson said. "It's nothing that I'm

proud of or anything, but I've done my time."

Wilkerson was 26 years old at the time.

The city's proposed ordinance scares Wilkerson, she said.

"If they put me out today and I can't go to San Diego where my family is, then I would be homeless in L.A.," Wilkerson said.

As a parolee, she can't leave the county for at least six months.

Wilkerson said she worries that the proposed rules would take away available beds in houses like the one she lives in on E. 91st Street in South L.A.

Right now there are nine people living safely in the three bedroom home, she said, while sitting on a couch in the living room.

"If this is working, I don't think it should be a whole big target on people that it's working for," Wilkerson said.

Wilkerson said she also is scared for the women who are still in prison and who are looking to be released. The Board of Parole Hearings could decide not to grant parole for women if their housing is not a definite at the time of their release, she said.

To "reintegrate back into society," Wilkerson said the board recommends parolees live in a group home or sober-living home instead of overwhelming their families upon their release.

For those who have no living relatives

and are truly starting over, where do they go if this housing closes down, Wilkerson asked.

If a parolee has set up living arrangements for after they're released, it doesn't guarantee that the board will grant parole, but problems with a plan for residence could provide good grounds for the board to deny parole, Wilkerson said.

She said she plans to live at A New Way of Life for 18 months.

"We're not just sitting around with a bunch of women," Wilkerson said. "We have daily chores, we have to be up in the morning, we have to have our beds made, you have to look for a job."

Susan Burton, who started A New Way of Life in 1998, began it has a safe place for women to come after they are released from prison.

Burton said she runs four homes, providing women with the support to find acceptance and a future that does not include prison.

"(The proposed ordinance) is outlandish and an attack on poor people," she said.

She said the city does have a problem with "rogue homes" that have no standards, but it is preposterous to group all the homes together.

Burton said she worries about the effect the ordinance will have on A New Way of Life.

"I will be unable to help people without breaking the law," she said. "It causes



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my heart to fall into my throat."

She started the agency after her own experiences with going in and out of prison six times through the 1980s and 90s for drug offenses taught her that there was no place within the community for help.

Burton suffered from depression and started using cocaine after her 5-year-old son was killed in 1981 when he ran into the street and was hit by a car.

After she was released from prison for the sixth time, Burton said a friend helped her get clean and she was eventually able to buy the home in South L.A.

But Englander said there is a lot of confusion over the ordinance that comes from misrepresentation by the opponents.

"With this ordinance, that's the funny thing and the irony, we will provide more housing opportunities and shared housing opportunities than any city in California has ever done," Englander said.

In the case of state-licensed facilities, the state rule is that six or

fewer can live in a home in a residential neighborhood, but Englander said the city's new regulations could allow for more people to live in a home.

If homes meet a "basic checklist," such as providing adequate parking, is not disruptive to neighbors and does not exceed two residents per bedroom, Englander said the number of people living in a home can exceed the state rule of six.

"Without an ordinance at all, the concern is that we're warehousing people and saying we're solving a problem — at least they're not on the street," he said.

But when a family is packed into a garage with no ventilation and no running water, Englander said that's not healthy and it's not solving a problem.

Englander said boarding homes are not legally allowed in residential zones and the new regulations would give the city the tools to enforce this.

Greg Spiegel, director of public policy and communications at Inner City Law Center in downtown L.A., said the proposed ordinance was

founded on a discriminatory purpose to get people with disabilities out of single-family neighborhoods, when these people want to live in a sober environment.

"Since then (the city has) tried to mask the intent by making it appear neutral on the surface but the intent is still the same and the discriminatory intent it carries with it," Spiegel said.

By eliminating housing, Spiegel said his concern is that people will end up living on the streets.

He said there is a legitimate purpose for an ordinance that addresses homes that have had multiple complaints, such as littering, constant noise or drug and alcohol use.

Spiegel said the proposed ordinance does not discern between the good and bad homes.

The Inner City Law Center is part of a coalition with more than 150 members, including the L.A. Chamber of Commerce and United Way of Greater L.A., to stop the ordinance from being passed.