



## Disability advocates to protest Northport zoning laws limiting group homes

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By **Hannah Wolfson -- The Birmingham News**

NORTHPORT, Alabama -- Disability advocates are planning to turn out today to protest a change in Northport's zoning laws that would limit group homes to one per mile.

City officials say the new rule is necessary to stem what they believe is a rising flood of applications for the group homes in anticipation of the closure of the state's Tuscaloosa center for the mentally disabled in November. But the mental health community says the ordinance is discriminatory and may violate federal housing laws.

"If they pass this, about 20 or 35 of the group homes will have nowhere to go, and the people who live there -- where are they going?" said Jeff Ridgeway of the advocacy group People First of Alabama. "This is their way of getting rid of their people with disabilities."

The Northport City Council plans to take up the ordinance, which was recommended by the city's planning commission, at its 6 p.m. council meeting today. It says that, among other requirements, no more than three unrelated people can live in a group home, that there must be enough off-street parking for all residents and employees, and that no group home may be set up within a one-mile radius of any other. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, the city is just less than 15 miles square.

Director of Planning and Inspection Katherine Ennis said city officials were about to start revamping the zoning laws when they realized they were receiving more business permit applications for group homes.

"We've just been getting a ton of them," Ennis said, along with expressions of neighborhood concerns. She said Northport's business license office estimates there's the potential for more than 30 new applications this year, and officials also discovered many more are operating without the required license.

The city believes group home requests will only increase with the shuttering of the W.D. Partlow Developmental Center in nearby Tuscaloosa, which is operated by the Alabama Department of Mental Health. It is set to close Nov. 30 -- although there is a lawsuit in the works to block the closure -- and has shrunk from 151 to about 58 residents.

"The ADMH view is that people, with or without disabilities, should have the right to live wherever they want," said department spokesman John Ziegler.

Ennis said the city believes its law is fair and similar to others around the state in setting certain requirements for a business license.

But the Alabama Disabilities Advocacy Program has filed an administrative complaint with the federal government saying the amended ordinance discriminates against people with disabilities, said James Tucker, director of litigation for ADAP, who compared it to historical restrictions denying housing based on race.

"We are encouraged that the state department of mental health is encouraging people to leave Partlow and live far more satisfying lives in the community," Tucker said. "And then you get an action like that in the city of Northport, and frankly I think it's based on discriminatory animus."

*Join the conversation by clicking to comment or email Wolfson at [hwolfson@bhamnews.com](mailto:hwolfson@bhamnews.com).*

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