



Tierre Crawford, 40, and Tonya Larry, 40, both caregivers at Racine group home accused of violent fight on-duty and now a judge said they have to stay away from their clients.

Some offenders allowed to work at group homes

From the A series: Racine and Wisconsin's 'personal care worker crisis' series

By: Jonathan Brines Apr 24, 2017

RACINE COUNTY — Two employees of a group home run by Love of Caring LLC in the 100 block of Howland Avenue, Racine, are facing misdemeanor battery and disorderly conduct charges after a physical fight on Jan. 5 at the home between the employees over work schedules.

The court commissioner in the case ordered the two employees, Tierre Crawford, 40, and Tonya Larry, 40, to stay away from the group home or its residents.

At the time of the incident, Larry told The Journal Times she was working for Crawford, who didn't show up for work to care for two mentally challenged residents.

"I was on the job," Larry said.

Larry said Crawford showed up three hours later with a family member.

"They slapped me and slapped the phone out of my hand and pulled my hair. What was I supposed to do? I called the police," Larry said. "I was defending myself."

Larry said she lost her job over the incident, even though she had five good years without incident with the company.

Love of Caring LLC officials could not be reached for comment. Larry said she feels victimized by a co-worker whom she said has a criminal record.

“She never should have been hired,” Larry said. “She shouldn’t be working in this industry.”

According to court records, Crawford has a 2013 guilty plea in a misdemeanor disorderly conduct case for a previous parking-lot fight in which she assaulted a man. Crawford also pleaded guilty to obstructing an officer and bail jumping in 2003 and a hit-and-run charge in 2001. Crawford could not be reached for comment.

Both Larry and Crawford, if convicted of the new charges, could still potentially be allowed to work in another group home, according to Wisconsin state statutes that list seven acceptable felonies convictions for employment: battery to an unborn child, battery with special circumstances, reckless endangerment, harassment, invasion of privacy, disorderly conduct and misdemeanor battery.

Larry said she wants the state to make changes to eliminate the exceptions even if it means she’s barred from employment over the incident.

“People put their family in the group home and never visit them,” Larry said. “I liked taking care of them. They connect with you and depend on you and they don’t feel lonely.”

Larry said she misses the residents she cared for every day and hopes they are well taken care of.

Background checks

Elizabeth Goodsitt, a spokeswoman for the Wisconsin Department of Health Services, which regulates group homes, confirmed the seven non-serious convictions do not prohibit employment but do require the employer to obtain more information to see if they still want to make the hire.

“The criminal complaint and judgment of conviction provide the employer with more information regarding the actual circumstances of the conviction,” Goodsitt said. “Under Fair Employment Law, an employer may refuse to hire someone if the person has been convicted of an offense that is not

on the offenses list but is, in the estimation of the entity, substantially related to the duties or circumstances of the job or residency.”

Larry said she’s trying to get a job at another group home, and that that group home is delaying hiring her until her charges are resolved.

DHS conducts a criminal background check on everyone who does anything for the home, including the licensee. They do so when a new group home is licensed, then every three years after that. If something happens in between, the employee is required to self-report a criminal allegation, especially if it involves his or her job.

The department is looking for convictions and pending criminal charges which “substantially relates to the care of dependent” resident or the funds or property of the resident in the group home, according to DHS policy 88. DHS is allowed to drop in for an assessment of a home at anytime, generally every two years, and can order drug and mental evaluations for workers if necessary.

The DHS Bureau of Assisted Living — which oversees facilities including group homes — reports seeing increases in complaints last year associated with residents wandering away, medical issues and challenging behaviors, as well as other issues, including a lack of qualified staff, low staffing levels and properly trained staff.

“I think we have had some good group homes, and some not-so-good ones,” said Luann Simpson, who works for the Racine chapter of National Alliance on Mental Illness. “There are not enough people to do that kind of work. We pay more to take care of our cars than people.”

The Madison-based Personal Care Association has reported a worker in a group home makes on average \$10.75 an hour.

Misconduct Registry

DHS does maintain a list of names of nurse aides with a substantiated finding of caregiver misconduct, including misappropriated funds or property of the resident and neglect or abuse of a resident. Called the Wisconsin Caregiver Misconduct Registry, it shows the first name, last name and date of birth of the individual so employers can use this to determine if a potential employee is eligible to work, according to DHS. Neither Larry nor Crawford are on that list.

Burlington resident Becky Borucki has a finding on the registry and is no longer eligible to work with the mentally disabled, or the elderly in group homes or other state facilities.

Borucki pleaded guilty in 2012 of stealing from the patients under her care and was sentenced to three years in prison and to pay \$15,000 in restitution to the victims. Burlington Police discovered Borucki was stealing from three residents — reportedly about \$24,383 — after they were contacted by the legal guardian of one of the men who noticed discrepancies in bank records.

All residents in her care were relocated. Due to Borucki being in jail, DHS suspended the license and revoked it after Borucki's sentencing.

According to DHS documents obtained by The Journal Times, the facility Borucki operated in her home was closed due to DHS revocation on Nov. 30, 2012. Subsequently, the facility is no longer listed on the DHS website and its history is only available via public information request.

Last year, the state had 36 inspectors to oversee 4,166 assisted living facilities statewide; the largest type was group homes, according to DHS.

Simpson concerned

Simpson said the state needs to do a better job protecting those who can't help themselves.

"The thing is, the majority of people who have mental health issues, who are living in a group home, they don't have a lot of choice," she said. "If they are in there under commitment, the county decides where they're going to go."

Simpson said for the situation to change, the community needs to think differently about at-risk individuals at group homes: "I think a lot of it boils down to: What value do we put on mental health in our society? I think a piece of it is a stigma. I think somehow we look at mental illnesses as not an illness. I think that has to change.

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