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Is The W a safe facility for its residents there?

Some who live there, and some who work there, tell stories of mice, food shortage

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Residents of The W Assisted Living at Riverdale congregate outside the facility on a sunny day this week. Many of them will grab a smoke, chat or make the trek to the Friendly Fridge to find some food to eat.

GARY JEAN-JUSTE

By Luisa Beltran

Josefina spent Mother's Day by having a wonderful dinner with her son and grandchildren. They ate out in Manhattan and had some ice cream. But the holiday ended too soon when Josefina had to return to her room at The W Assisted Living at Riverdale Home for Adults. "I'm always sad to have to come back to The W. Anytime I get away from here is good," she said wistfully.

Josefina is one of the more than 250 residents of The W Assisted Living at Riverdale. Located near 254th Street and Broadway, the facility caters to residents who can't live by themselves due to "physical, mental, or other limitations" that can come from age or other factors, according to a definition on the New York State Department of Health website.

At 62, Josefina has scoliosis and ended up at The W after she had back surgery. She was forced to give up her Manhattan apartment, where she had lived for 15 years. She has family, including four children, but doesn't want to live with them. This month marks her one-year anniversary at The W.

Along with three residents and two employees of The W Assisted Living, Josefina spoke to The Riverdale Press about the conditions at the adult home. The six people did not give their full names for fear of reprisal for what that revealed.

Mice and roaches crawl everywhere, while the bathrooms are rarely cleaned, they said. The elevators are often broken, forcing many residents, some who use walkers, to sleep on the first floor, they said.

One employee of The W blamed the mess on the lack of porters but mentioned they are hiring. The food is not nutritious and lack variety. Dishes include boiled chicken, chicken curry, chicken nuggets and frozen pancakes. Fresh fruit is rarely available while vegetables include carrots and peas, some members of the group said.

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“The food is crappy. There is never enough milk,” a second employee said.

The food is so bad that each day about a dozen residents from The W Assisted Living make the trek down to the Friendly Fridge Bronx on 242nd Street and Broadway. There, they get free food, including meals, fresh vegetables and fruit, operators of the Fridge said.

The following is a written statement from June 21 from The W management received after the original story was printed.

“We care deeply for the residents in our facility, many of whom suffer a variety of challenges, and are committed to operating a safe facility for them and the surrounding community.

“W group has invested considerable resources to upgrade the facility since taking over. We are committed to resolving issues in collaboration with input from residents and the community.”

The W Assisted Living is well known in the Bronx area. The five-story building sits across from the horse stables at Van Cortlandt Park and is down the street from Hugo’s Gourmet Market. In the 2000s, the facility was known as The Riverdale Manor Home for Adults, and it catered to people with mental illness.

That was supposed to change in 2013 when a lawsuit challenging the illegal warehousing of people with mental illness in adult homes was settled, according to the Urban Justice Center. The settlement of the O’Toole vs. (Gov. Andrew) Cuomo lawsuit aimed to give thousands of adult home residents the opportunity to move out of restrictive group homes and into supportive housing, the New York Lawyers for the Public Interest website said.

The lawsuit was supposed to have an impact on the The W Assisted Living population, and it has, just not the way that was expected. Mentally ill persons still comprise much of the home’s residents. The newest members are the low-income seniors, with no place to go who are placed at The W Assisted Living.

For example, Mary, who is 82, has lived at the facility for a year. She still doesn’t know what is wrong with her. One day in 2022 she fainted in the street and ended up in the hospital. She lost her Harlem apartment and became a resident of The W Assisted Living because she couldn’t afford a better facility.

“I have my pension but it’s not enough,” Mary told The Riverdale Press.

As an assisted living facility, The W isn’t required to provide around the clock care for its members like a nursing home. It has an open-door policy and residents can come and go as they like. Several sit outside the building at all hours, in cold weather and on hot sunny days, without protection.

In January, when temperatures dipped into the single digits, some of the W’s residents were found walking around wearing shorts and flip-flops. The situation caused a firestorm on Facebook with many Riverdale neighbors unaware of the conditions at The W.

Kari Munoz, who doesn’t live in Riverdale but has visited friends in the area for more than a decade, donated clothes to some residents of The W during the winter. She also filed a complaint about the treatment of The W residents with the Justice Center for the Protection of People with Special Needs in December.

“I never heard back from them,” Munoz said.

There are federal rules to protect nursing home residents from abuse, but assisted living facilities do not have these protections, said Richard Mollot, executive director of the Long Term Care Community Coalition, a non-profit that advocates for nursing home and assisted living residents.

“People too often are not getting the care and services they need, they’re not being treated in a way that is humane, and the conditions can be inhumane,” Mollot said.

The W Assisted Living is one of about 70 adult care facilities in New York City that house about 10,000 people, according to Geoff Lieberman, executive director, of the Coalition of Institutionalized Aged and Disabled, a non-profit that has been working with residents in homes run by The W Group.

It's very easy to end up in an adult facility like The W Assisted Living, Lieberman said. When a person suffers a physical or mental disability, they may fall on hard times, require an extended hospital stay and lose their housing, he said. "Once they can't maintain a living arrangement where they were, they have few options where to go, especially if they need continued support and assistance," Lieberman said.

After a hospital stay, people who still need medical care may wind up in a nursing home. Those who don't, but can't live by themselves, will often get shuttled to places like The W Assisted Living, Lieberman said. For each resident of The W Assisted Living, Medicaid will pay from \$93.19 to \$155.96 for assisted living services for each day they stay at the home depending on their level of need, according to the state health department, updated rate guidelines. Assisted living facilities can also tap a resident's Social Security and pension for payment.

Facilities like The W will often provide a semi-private shared room with a shared bath, three meals a day, some level of personal care, daily activities, and a nurse to dispense medicines. Josefina said she pays \$1,300 a month for a shared room.

But the biggest danger in assisted living may come from its owners. In 2016, The W Management Group, which does business as The W Group, acquired a majority stake in the Riverdale Manor Home for Adults. The W Group is considered a financial investor and more in line with private equity firms, which have emerged as active buyers of nursing homes during the last two decades.

The W Group is copying some of the tactics used by private equity firms, including buying up several companies in a sector. The W Group is one of the biggest operators of assisted living facilities in New York state; their portfolio includes more than 20 assisted living homes, including three in the Bronx. It is owned by Luzer Weiss, according to documents from the New York state health department.

Berry and Aryeh Weiss, who are brothers, lead The W Group and are believed to be the sons of Luzer Weiss. Berry Weiss is chief executive of The W Group while Aryeh is president of the W Group, the company website said. An entrepreneur, he founded Preferred Home Care of New York in 2007. The company, which provides home health aides and personal care assistants to seniors, was sold, along with Edison Home Health Care, in 2022 to Help at Home, which is owned by private equity firms.

"The W has indeed been a concern to us because they have bought up a good number of adult homes in New York City and New York state. We are concerned about the so-called corporatization of care and the services residents are receiving there," CIAD's Lieberman said.

The state health department is charged with oversight and surveillance of adult care facilities like The W Assisted Living.

From Jan. 1, 2019 to Dec. 31, 2022, the agency had conducted 24 inspections of The W facility that resulted in 29 violations. It's not clear if the health department has visited The W Assisted Living this year.

The department reviews "every complaint it receives to determine if the issue is a possible regulatory violation, which includes unannounced onsite surveys as well as offsite record reviews," said Monica Pomeroy, a spokeswoman.

Anyone with concerns about an adult care facility can call the centralized complaint line at (866) 893-6772, she said.

This is the first of a two-part series on The W.

Keywords

The W Assisted Living at Riverdale Home for Adults, living conditions, New York State Department of Health, Friendly Fridge, Berry Weiss, Aryeh Weiss, Richard Mollot, Long Term Care Community Coalition, roaches, mice, food,

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