

Sober house operator welcomes crackdown on 'flop houses'

By **Andres David Lopez**
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Joshua Cope, 25, doesn't mind sharing his story. He grew up in Hartford, Conn. When he was 14, his uncle prepared the dosage and shot him up with heroin.

"I hungered for it ever since," he said in an interview last week.

Cope said he faced multiple felony charges in his late teens and spent several months in jail. In his early 20s, he earned a business degree from the University of Connecticut and other trade certifications, but also maintained a drug habit. He used alcohol and crack cocaine.

Eventually, he walked the streets homeless. About six months ago, he came to Florida and entered treatment. After treatment, he moved into Fellowship Living Facilities in Margate. He turned 25 in the sober living house, or halfway house.

"I've never been happier in my life," he said. "I think I was meant to come to this place."

The Florida Legislature recently acknowledged the effectiveness of sober houses in combating addiction.

"The Legislature finds that a person suffering from addiction has a higher success rate of achieving long-lasting sobriety when given the opportunity to build a stronger foundation by living in a recovery residence after completing treatment," states House Bill 21.

According to the bill, which was passed by both the House and Senate and must be signed by Gov. Rick Scott before it becomes law, individuals suffering from addiction represent "a vulnerable consumer population in need of adequate housing."

For Rick Riccardi, who founded Fellowship Living Facilities, the sober house bill is a positive step toward protecting both people in recovery and local communities from unscrupulous sober house operators.

Riccardi said the bill was prompted in part by residents across the state resisting having unregulated sober houses, or halfway houses, in their neighborhoods.

Assuming the bill is signed into law, starting in 2016, sober house operators will be able to seek certification which will require them to meet agreed-upon standards. The bill will also prevent treatment centers from referring patients to uncertified sober houses.

This is a huge deal, Riccardi said, because sober houses with unscrupulous operators, what are known as "flop houses," can be a source of big profits.

He explained how the FBI and other law enforcement agencies have found healthcare fraud in halfway houses before. In 2012, two sober house operators in Broward were charged with conspiracy after receiving kickbacks from healthcare companies for resident referrals.

Riccardi said sober houses can also make a lot of money striking deals with drug test laboratories so that both the operator and laboratory profit from insurance reimbursements.

At Fellowship Living Facilities, which operates a men's location in Margate and a women's location in Fort Lauderdale, drug testing is mostly done on the premises using over-the-counter kits.

In addition to submitting random drug tests, residents are required to abide by a list of more than 30 rules. They have to make curfew and attend 12-step recovery meetings. They have to seek out employment and perform community service.

"They are grateful and humble to be doing anything," said Glenn Miller, a house manager, referring to residents. "We give back to this community."

Miller, 52, is a certified addictions counselor, and he helps keep track of the more than 90 men living in the Margate facility at any one time. In Fort Lauderdale, Fellowship Living Facilities manages more than 30 beds for women.

Last week, Cope sat outside the building housing Riccardi's office. He held "Alcoholics Anonymous" in one hand and his pen in the other. Residents are required to keep a daily journal and write about their feelings.

"I only focused on the bad part of Josh," he wrote, "but today, I see the good in him, and I'm prepared to fix the problem."

With the help of Fellowship Living Facilities, Cope said, his life has turned around dramatically. He recently purchased a car, and he is employed at a local sandwich shop, along with several others who are in recovery. He also plans to visit his daughter soon, whom he hasn't seen in several years. The plan is to try to move out of Fellowship Living Facilities once he hits 14 months of sobriety.

An estimated 40 to 60 percent of people resume using drugs after rehab, according to the National Institute on Drug Abuse. Cope, Miller and Riccardi all take pride in the fact that more than 20 men currently living in the Margate facility have more than one year in recovery.

"People tend to do better here," Cope said.

