The Washington Post
Democracy Dies in Darkness

A farm for the disabled and a celebrity gun trainer try to 'stop Big Rehab'

A private equity-owned mental health company wants to set up group homes in rural Northern Virginia. Some neighbors say it's not up to zoning code — and could jeopardize the nonprofit next door.

By Teo Armus

September 12, 2023 at 6:00 a.m. EDT

To the executives at Newport Healthcare, the family compound seemed like the ideal location to expand their company's mental health treatment program into Northern Virginia.

Tucked away behind a gate off a hilly country road, the million-dollar houses offered a bucolic environment in which to treat young adults grappling with depression or anxiety.

Each building would host a handful of patients for about six weeks at a time, with music and art therapy and organic meals cooked on-site — for as much as $2,000 a day. The swimming pool and tennis courts didn't hurt, either.

But many residents in this rural corner of Loudoun County have insisted they see something else down the street: A for-profit company setting up a luxe rehab facility that will ruin their neighborhood.

Greg Masucci, co-founder of A Farm Less Ordinary (AFLO), leases about 10 acres next door for his nonprofit farm, which hires and trains young adults with developmental and intellectual disabilities.

He said he fears Newport patients could wander over and harm the disabled farmers — even though such an incident has yet to occur — or at the very least create chaos and disturb them. "I don't exactly want that on my doorstep," he said.

Together with a group of the farm's neighbors, Masucci has tried to block the private equity-owned Newport from fully moving into this site an hour's drive from D.C., putting up signs in the area that highlight their campaign to "Stop Big Rehab."

At county zoning meetings, however, other area residents have suggested that the group, Protect Loudoun, is making alarmist allegations about young people struggling with mental health issues amid a nationwide shortage of treatment for such challenges.

They have charged that Protect Loudoun is essentially discriminating against Newport patients and asking county officials to violate federal housing laws that protect people with disabilities, including psychiatric conditions such as PTSD.

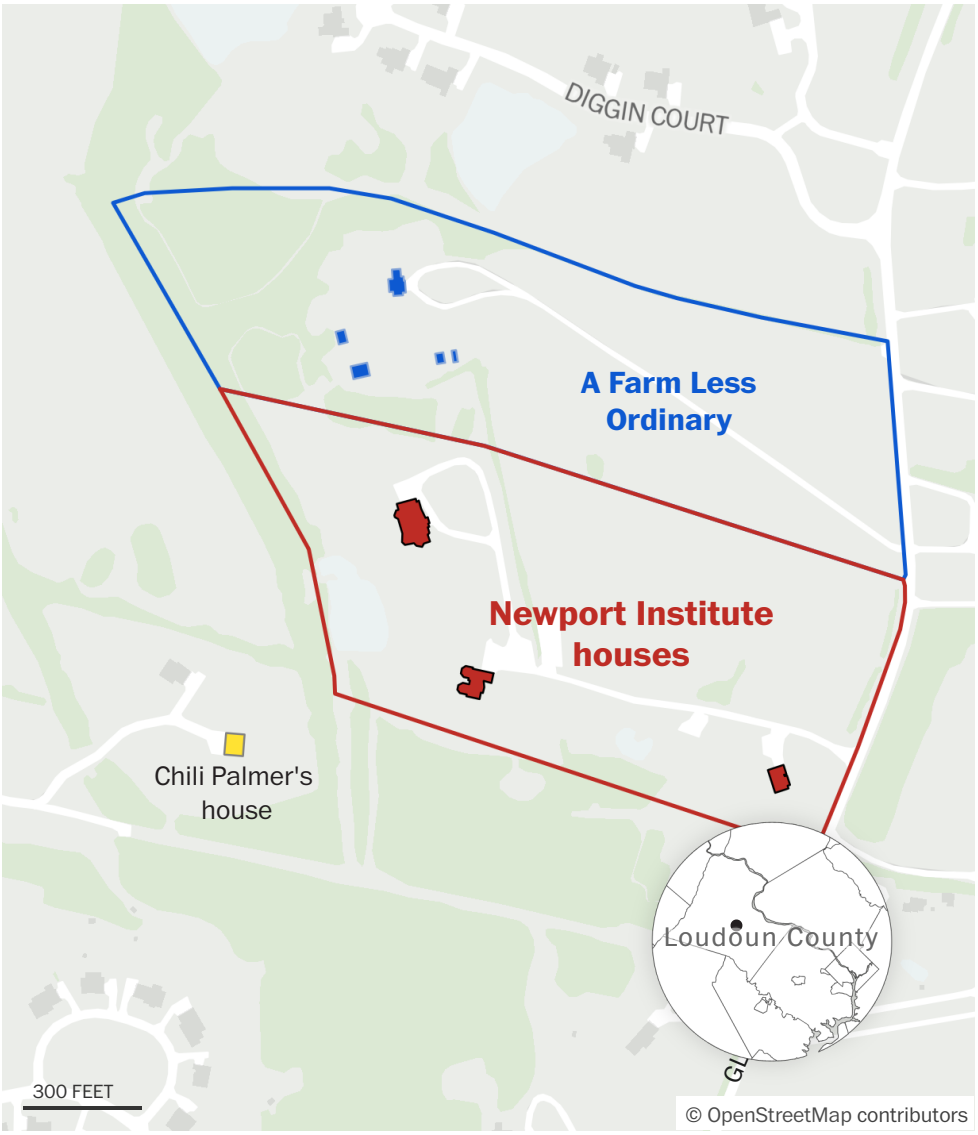
(Newport, which has insisted it does not treat addiction in Loudoun County and screens patients for substance use, declined to comment due to ongoing litigation.)

What started out nearly two years ago as a neighborly spat has since devolved into a charged collision of disability and mental health issues that are effectively being weaponized against each other.

And that's in addition to the actual weapons — fired at a shooting range next door to Newport's properties by an Army veteran who trains Hollywood actors how to use guns.

"In the history of bad ideas, opening a facility for 24 adults paying to receive treatment for anxiety, PTSD, depression, and more right next to an active range … is up there with some of the worst," said Craig "Chili" Palmer, who is fresh off a stint working on the set of "Extraction 2."

Gleedsville Road properties



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The disagreement, which is playing out simultaneously before a local zoning board and a state appeals court, is — at least on paper — mostly about how the properties function: whether Newport is setting up separate group homes next door to one another or whether they count as one facility that stretches across three houses and thus is not allowed in the area.

Yet tensions over the issue have far eclipsed any questions about zoning — and gotten intensely personal instead.

“I oftentimes hear we’re going to bring people into the neighborhood who are not appropriate,” the company’s CEO, Joe Procopio, said at a meeting last year. “People we treat are like my own children, like some of your children, and likely some of your neighbors’ children.”

Masucci, though, has cited his own children as the reason he so staunchly opposes Newport.

His son Max is nonverbal and autistic, which prompted the family to move here a decade ago in search of a calmer environment — and a place where they could one day set up a group home for others like him. Laws meant to protect that kind of long-term residence, he charged, were being exploited to make way for Newport's short-term treatment facilities.

"The thing with the group home is that it was designed so people — people like my son — could feel a sense of community, with neighbors who would look out for them," he said. "It's not for some rich kid who did too many drugs to go clean up."

A growing mental health company

What is now a national network of facilities around the country — Newport Academy for teens and Newport Institute for young adults — began as the brainchild of then-25-year-old Jamison Monroe. The son of a wealthy Houston financier, he had spent much of his adolescence bouncing between cocaine, DUIs and rehab until he found a $2,200-a-day recovery program that managed to work.

Inspired to help others with their own mental health struggles, he opened a six-bed treatment facility in Orange County, Calif., Bloomberg Businessweek wrote in a 2016 profile. Although he had managed to tap into mounting demand for treatment in Southern California, his operation stood out for its "sheer opulence and pampering," the article said.

There was a rose garden and chandeliers, horse stables for equine therapy, yoga and an on-site chef who cooked only organic food — all for $40,000 a month. More facilities followed across the United States, including one that hosted Ethan Couch, who infamously cited "affluenza" as the cause of a deadly drunk-driving incident.

"Instead of utilizing fear, we come from love and from compassion," Monroe says in one online video advertising the program. "Our focus is on long-term, sustainable healing."

In 2018, Newport — then acquired by the Carlyle Group, a D.C. private equity firm — bought three adjacent properties in the tony Washington suburb of McLean. By then, its population of patients had grown more diverse: The company's website notes it now accepts most major forms of insurance and about four in five patients come from families making less than $250,000 a year.

But when this wealthy Virginia community found out about the plan, neighbors exploded in rage. They said the facility would clog up roads and create havoc in their quiet residential area. At one community meeting, they called Monroe arrogant and smug and booed some young adults who had come to speak about how hard it had been to find mental health treatment in the area.

More crucially, though, Fairfax County's zoning administrators were unconvinced that Newport could legally set up there. Citing the homes' shared driveway and security guard, as well as Newport's renovations to add parking and fencing, they said the company was evidently trying to set up a "single residential facility."

That type of use was not allowed under zoning laws and would need special permission from county lawmakers — a challenge given the local reaction.

In 2021, after Carlyle sold its share to a Canadian private-equity firm for $1.3 billion and new leadership took over, Newport contacted zoning officials in Loudoun County with a familiar request.

The company was looking to buy three adjacent properties outside Leesburg, its lawyers wrote in a letter reviewed by The Post, and was hoping to turn them into three "single-sex group residential facilities" to treat mental health issues.

Michelle Lohr, the county's deputy zoning administrator, wrote in her reply that the proposed use was a "congregate facility," which — as in Fairfax — would not be allowed under zoning rules in such an area. (Glen Barbour, a spokesman for Loudoun County, declined to comment, citing active litigation.)

But, Lohr suggested, there was an alternative. Just as Newport's own lawyers had pointed out, each house could serve as a residential facility for up to eight people "with mental illness, intellectual disability, or developmental disabilities." They just had to be independent of each other.

Then a letter showed up at a few homes on Gleedsville Road: Newport had purchased the family compound, which zoning officials said the company could turn into group homes. And the need for mental health services, a company representative wrote, "had escalated dramatically."

The farm and the firing range

On a humid, cloudy day last week, Masucci plodded through his greenhouse, eyeing rows of tomatoes and sunflowers. In T-shirts with phrases like "Romain Calm and Carry On," a handful of his employees picked vegetables one by one and plopped them into crates.

"You could basically just walk over here," he said, pointing out the houses where Newport had begun operating earlier this year a few hundred yards away.

Masucci and his wife first created the organization — which has two locations in Loudoun County — as a way to help young adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities like his son when "the bus stops coming" and they age out of school programming.

He said the farm offers employment training and a safe social environment: Masucci and a few other staffers conduct job interviews, teach the employees how to grow vegetables, make jams and pickles, and sell at the farmers' market. As they gain skills, he pays them a steadily increasing wage.

But he fears that the operation on Gleedsville Road could be in jeopardy as Newport fully sets up its operation. The nonprofit farm — which conducts criminal background checks for all of its volunteers — would assume liability if Newport patients wander over to his greenhouse, he said, or simply create a disturbance nearby.

“I have no idea where the hell they came from, what their background is, what they’re there for, nor would I be able to find out anything about them,” he said. “My first responsibility is my employees. These are people who could be easily compromised.”

Protect Loudoun members insist they are not trying to demonize Newport’s patients. They reject the idea they are NIMBYs — a pejorative term short for “not in my backyard” — by pointing out that one homeowner has allowed the farm to use her land for less than $100 a month.

Palmer, the celebrity gun trainer who lives down the road, said that he is not discriminating against anyone either: He is now classified as a 100 percent disabled veteran. After 25 years in the Army — where he got his nickname thanks to a resemblance to John Travolta’s “Get Shorty” character — the 53-year-old now serves as a military adviser on movie sets.

But he needs to operate a firing range in his backyard to keep his skills sharp, he said, most recently preparing Chris Hemsworth for a role as a mercenary.

“It would be a shooting range next to people that are trying to have peace, tranquility,” he said. “Why do you want to put something like that there?”

‘Rolling in the streets’

Inside a county government room last year, Melissa Taliaferro got up in front of a packed crowd in defense of Newport. She had heard the complaints from neighbors and felt someone needed to push back.

“It’s unfair to assume and to paint these individuals with a broad brush to imply that they’re going to be running around the community, that they’re going to be rolling in the streets, that they’re going to be dangerous to others,” she told the room. “That may happen, but that may also happen if these individuals are living in our community without any care.”

Once some neighbors found out Newport was moving in, Protect Loudoun filed challenges to the company’s ability to set up adjacent group homes and set off years of meetings before the Board of Zoning Appeals. At many of them, other residents like Taliaferro have disputed the group’s claims.

The group has so far spent about $200,000 in legal fees, three-quarters of which came from personal contributions, to take the dispute up to the local zoning board and the Virginia State Court of Appeals.

And while lawyers have on several occasions sparred over whether the letter from Loudoun zoning officials was an official determination that opened the door for the group homes, residents have focused on much else: who is being treated and for what, when they can go in or out of the property, and how that might affect the neighborhood.

The company has said that it does not treat addiction, but Protect Loudoun has seized on the fact that Newport may treat conditions that are linked to it, such as anxiety and depression.

The company told some residents early on that it would only treat women on-site, but neighbors have pointed out Newport ads for male treatment facilities in Northern Virginia.

There have been clashes about depressed property values and mentions of reported car theft near the company's other facilities. After some officials grilled the company on whether similar incidents could happen in Loudoun, Procopio said that Newport's facilities are unlocked and clients come on a voluntary basis.

For now, though, Newport has begun treating patients on Gleedsville Road — and worries among some neighbors remain high.

Two weeks ago, one of them said she spotted something unusual: A young woman seemed to have been running away from the Newport houses up the street. (The company declined to comment.)