



A critical need to house mentally ill

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Chances are you know someone with a serious mental illness. Chances are even greater that someone with a mental illness lives near you.

One person in 17 - about 6 percent of the population - has a serious mental illness such as depression, bipolar disorder or schizophrenia, according to the National Institute of Mental Health.

They are our relatives, friends, children, neighbors.

That's why we're sympathetic to a proposal for an apartment building in Arlington Heights that would provide affordable supportive care to residents being treated for mental illness. We understand the concerns some residents feel about the site's proximity to Buffalo Grove High School and to a day-care center. We've watched the same Hollywood movies that make it seem like violence and mental illness go hand-in-hand.

But reality is a different story.

Mentally ill people are no more likely to commit crimes than anyone else, said Jay D. Forman of Thresholds, a nonprofit psychiatric rehabilitation agency partnering in the housing plan. People living in the apartments would be in treatment, and no one with a criminal record would be allowed to live there,

Most reassuring are statements from potential residents and their families who've spoken at public discussions of the proposal, showing the mentally ill really are no different from any of us in desiring a home that meets their needs.

There's a critical need, the League of Women Voters of the Arlington Heights-Mount Prospect-Buffalo Grove Area noted in throwing its support behind the project. Existing housing for the mentally ill tends to either isolate residents and fail to provide necessary assistance or go to the other extreme, needlessly institutionalizing people who don't require such restrictions, the League pointed out.

There are legitimate concerns, such as the amount of parking and number of apartments at the site, which was chosen after a study of 70 locations in the area. Buffalo Grove Village President Elliott Hartstein voiced those issues in a letter to Arlington Heights trustees. They are valid points of discussion, raised, we hope, in the spirit of making the housing proposal better.

It's important to remember that those who would move into the apartment building aren't outsiders. The task force that came up with the housing plan is made up of people from the North and Northwest suburbs, most of whom have relatives with mental illness. Residents of the area would be given preference for apartments, according to a village of Arlington Heights staff report.

They are our relatives, friends, children and neighbors. And as a community, we owe it to them to do our best to help them find a home.