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[Lindsay Butler](#), Tribune

Proposal would restrict group homes' locations

Three years ago, Chino Hernandez was just emerging from the prison system. He couldn't go home to California, but jobs were scarce for a man with a record. And he didn't want to go back to his old ways.

Hernandez needed a home.

"I thought I would stay at Kokopelli for a couple weeks," said Hernandez, now 43. "And here I am, three years later."

Hernandez is now a manager at Kokopelli Group Home in Mesa, one of 76 recovery homes in the city dedicated to housing people who are fresh from the prison system or fighting a drug or alcohol addiction — or, as is often the case, both.

For 15 years, group homes like Kokopelli have been required to obtain a license by the city and are labeled under the city code as a "group home for the handicapped."

But now, the city is in talks to further regulate the homes by stripping them of the handicapped label and requiring them to relocate to industrial areas.

Steve Collins, co-founder of Kokopelli Group Homes, says he maintains strict rules at his homes and that the city is fighting the wrong battle.

"You know what their biggest problem is? They have 100 group homes that are not registered," Collins said. "They are fighting the wrong category of people."

Collins plans to meet with other group-home operators to submit their own suggestions to the city.

The changes at the city level were brought on by concerns of crimes near Mesa's group homes.

"We've talked to group homes in the past, and they say they'd like to self-police," said City Councilman Mike Whalen during Thursday's public safety committee meeting. "That's not going to work."

Part of the problem the city faces when dealing with group homes is simply how they are labeled.

Since most of the homes house recovering addicts, they are listed in the city code as "group homes for the handicapped," a problem for some city leaders.

"People are taking advantage of the handicapped definition to live in a single-family residence," said City Councilman Tom Rawles. "Some of these people are coming out of prison who are not handicapped but they are saying they are."

The changes proposed at the city level would differentiate between homes for people who fit the legal definition of handicapped — as spelled out by the Federal Fair Housing Act — and homes for recent parolees or recovering addicts.

These recovery homes would be relabeled "correctional transitional housing facilities" and required to be in commercial or industrial districts.

Collins said he has many concerns about that idea, because prices are higher in those districts and transportation options are scarce.

“If they are located at Falcon Field or Williams Gateway, there’s no transportation,” he said. “And these people don’t have cars.”

Collins said he knows group homes have a stigma in the community, but calls them a necessary evil.

“They have to live someplace,” he said.

Collins started Kokopelli with Dorothy Olson in 2005 after watching a family member go through some bad group homes. Now, the two operate five homes in Mesa.

The Kokopelli homes maintain strict rules such as daily curfews, drug-free policies and requiring that the residents hold steady jobs.

For about \$500 a month, the Kokopelli homes provide a decent bed, a computer, Internet access and someone to talk to.

“They need what you call ‘home,’ ” Hernandez said. “We’re not throwing books in their face. They come here and relax.”

The Kokopelli home near downtown Mesa features two couches, a recliner, a big-screen TV, wooden floors and a home gym.

There are usually three or four residents to a bedroom, and the place has a dormitory feel.

A magnet on the fridge reads, “Everything I know I learned in prison.”

Collins said each resident is assigned chores. He tells them, “You’re going to get married someday, and you’re going to have to do chores.”

Collins says that when he opens a new home, he usually gets a few raised eyebrows from the neighbors, but that most aren’t concerned.

“The thing you have to understand is that almost everyone you talk to has an alcoholic in their family, or someone who has done jail time or is addicted to drugs,” Collins said. “This person is trying to get back to society.”



WELCOME HOME: Steve Collins runs the Kokopelli Group Home in Mesa. He is critical of the city’s plan to regulate group homes, making them harder to operate in Mesa. Parolees and recovering drug addicts “have to live someplace,” Collins says.