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EDITORIALS

Washington House's mission



Cathie Rowand | The Journal Gazette

Washington House board members Fred Eckart, left, Carol Durham and Bob Meyer in front of the building that housed the former program's substance abuse treatment center.

Washington House was long seen as the treatment center of last resort, the place that would help people with substance abuse problems when they had nowhere else to go.

After financial issues forced the house to close, its board – and county officials – is determined to continue the mission. It wants to use the Washington House building to help convicted criminals who have a dual diagnosis of mental health, as well as substance abuse, problems.

For the county to help substance abusers at the site, the city Board of Zoning Appeals must reinstate the zoning variance that Washington House held. The variance permitting a group home in the residentially zoned area allows participants to stay overnight in the building. The BZA should approve it, especially considering that the Culbertson Street building previously had a variance for essentially the same use.

In addition, housing around Washington House, northeast of Taylor and Freeman streets, is not dense. Its biggest neighbor is the ASH Centre, formerly Tahcumwah Sports and Recreation.

If the county's plans are fulfilled, the new treatment center should benefit local residents – at relatively low financial cost. The Washington House board will give the building to the county before disbanding. The county is seeking a federal grant to pay much of the cost of treating and housing about 40 participants in the Community Corrections program.

About 20 percent of the Community Corrections population – those sentenced to home detention or returning to the community from state prison – have a diagnosis of mentally ill chemical abuser. They can be among the most difficult to rehabilitate and to find suitable housing for. Making sure patients follow their prescription drug regimen, for example, is vital.

Community Corrections offers a wide variety of programs designed to help participants become productive and less likely to commit new crimes, and each success marks a financial savings to the

community. Successful participants don't create new victims, don't cost courts and police, and can reduce costs to the health care system.

If the building is used around the clock, Community Corrections will install cameras and other security equipment.

Few Americans face problems on the level of convicted criminals with mental health and substance abuse problems. Punishment through incarceration or home detention alone does not address underlying issues that can cause criminal behavior. Treating the offenders will help protect the community and will allow the mission of Washington House to continue.

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