

# Christie: Are we painting PBC sober homes with too broad a brush?

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Matthew Anderson talks with his attorney during a court hearing in May. Anderson, owner of two Palm Beach County sober homes where police responded to 28 calls last year — including six overdoses — was arrested on multiple counts of patient brokering. (Lannis Waters / The Palm Beach Post)

As Palm Beach County seems to sink further into an opioid crisis that continues to kill people with impunity, a question arises as to the proper villain in this tragedy.

Operators of sober homes, those treatment centers where many addicts reside to help kick their habit, are increasingly concerned that too much government time — and money — is being spent on cleaning up their industry rather than actual treatment.

That appears to be the gist of Sunday's "Point of View" op-ed penned by licensed psychologist Rachel Needle.

One could argue that the fact that fentanyl is now killing more people than heroin in Florida bolsters her point that more focus should be on treatment.

[RELATED: Fentanyl killing more in Florida than heroin: CDC report](#)

What do you think?

***POINT OF VIEW: Treatment is vital to addicts' recovery***

Palm Beach County State Attorney Dave Aronberg testified recently to Congress about sober home abuses.

While politicians, prosecutors and many others often speak about the two interchangeably, a sober living facility (aka sober home) is not the same as a substance use disorder treatment center (aka rehab, treatment center).

Sober homes are group homes where people who are in recovery live together. Some sober homes are affiliated with treatment centers, while others are not. Living in a sober home — and paying rent, buying their own food, living by rules, remaining sober — helps a person in recovery take responsibility for their life and regain their independence.

A treatment center is where an individual struggling with abuse of alcohol or drugs goes to get treatment. At treatment centers, there are licensed mental health professionals and physicians involved in treatment. There are different levels of care at treatment centers, including detox, residential, day/night treatment (sometimes referred to as partial hospitalization), intensive outpatient, and outpatient treatment.

“The majority of sober homes in South Florida” (which is where I can speak to) are not “flophouses.” As in all industries, there are people who are unethical and take advantage of the system. Luckily, Aronberg and the Sober Home Task Force have made significant progress with that problem in South Florida. They have written and passed new legislation, and arrested those with unethical and illegal practices.

Maybe it is time that we move on to what I see as the biggest issue (besides the societal issue we have), and that is the insurance companies.

Of course, there are negative things in the world of substance use disorder treatment, but we are leaving out a lot of the positives.

In most cases, people are not overdosing and dying because of bad sober homes. They are overdosing and dying because they are abusing substances, their tolerance is lower after being sober for a period of time, the drugs are more potent or synthetic, and because the insurance companies do not give people the time they need in treatment to have the highest chance at success. Research has shown that the longer you are in treatment, the more likely you are to remain sober. It also tells us that the longer you stay abstinent from drugs and alcohol, the more likely you are to continue being abstinent.

Unethical and illegal sober home operators are few and far between. South Florida has



Palm Beach County chief assistant state attorney Al Johnson, left, Congresswoman Lois Frankel, and State Attorney Dave Aronberg, right, announce that a grand jury has issued 15 recommendations to combat the opioid crisis in Palm Beach County last December. (Richard Graulich / The Palm Beach Post)

many great treatment providers and a lot of individuals who are getting help, changing their lives for the better, and staying sober. We should highlight some of those success stories.

Do your research on a treatment center or sober home before going or sending a loved one to make sure it is a reputable and legitimate place. I assure you, there are incredible treatment centers and sober homes in South Florida that have helped thousands of people. Let's shift this conversation once and for all.

**RACHEL NEEDLE, FORT LAUDERDALE**

*Editor's note: Rachel Needle is a licensed psychologist at the Center for Marital and Sexual Health of South Florida and an adjunct professor at Nova Southeastern University.*