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NEWTON — Like many 20-somethings, Aaron Bloom of Newton has a part-time job and takes college classes. However, when the 23-year-old moved out of his mother’s condo and into his own place earlier this month, the experience was anything but typical. Bloom, who has Asperger’s, has settled into a new Newton house specially designed by Jewish Family & Children’s Service (JF&CS) for young adults with disabilities, and is transitioning well to independent living.

With five supported living houses — four in Norwood and the new home in Newton that opened last month — JF&CS is helping to make the dream of independent living a reality for more young people like Bloom.

“This was a godsend to my family,” said Bloom’s mother, Iris Lavine. “I’d been working with JF&CS for many years to find him a structured living arrangement. Nothing had panned out. (The Newton house) really fit well because it is close to where he was living before, so he is comfortable with the area. It is close to friends and our synagogue, Temple Reyim. It is also close to his work and school.”
Although JF&CS has had residential housing for people with disabilities for decades through its CHAI program, state regulations have become increasingly more complicated.

“A lot of families are coming to us with nowhere to go for housing for young adult children with disabilities,” explained Sara Freedman, director of community programs at JF&CS. Recent interest from private developers to work in partnership with JF&CS has resulted in innovative and affordable solutions for new disabilities houses — with and without state subsidies.

“We have to start thinking out of the box to come up with creative solutions to address the massive amounts of people (with disabilities) who want an opportunity to live in a community with the specific supports that they need,” said Doreen Cummings, associate division director of Housing and Family Support at JF&CS.

The new house in Newton is the most recent example of JF&CS’s visionary solution to the problem. The home, which houses 14 individuals, utilizes the strengths of JF&CS as a service provider, while the developer remains responsible for building and maintaining the house. The project incorporates independent living with a strong sense of community, and easy opportunities for socialization and joint recreation. The large house boasts individual bedrooms and shared kitchen, living and bathroom space. Residents generally eat dinner as a group, sharing in kitchen duties, with supervision from staff who remain on site overnight for support.

During the day, residents, who come from a variety of religious backgrounds, are active in a wide range of activities, from working or taking classes, to volunteering, or participating in a day program or job training. Thus far, the age range is 22-41, but there is no age limit as long as residents are safely supported.

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“Our model relies heavily on families continuing to provide support to ensure their child’s success,” Freedman said.
“Staying in their own neighborhood and close to families gives (residents) the opportunity to be as successful as possible.”

Though sometimes neighbors are initially resistant, the happy environment of each house generally wins people over.

“Anytime anyone meets our residents, it is clear just how happy they are in this type of independent living environment,” Freedman said.

The Newton house is situated close to the city center, allowing residents easy access to dining, shopping and public transportation.

“We are really excited that they will be able to explore and do more things,” Freedman said.

With limited state funding for residential support, the need for more housing for those with disabilities isn’t going away, and JF&CS has made disabilities services a priority (see sidebar).

“For people with Down’s Syndrome, mild autism and other developmental disabilities who want a social community built into their lives, they should have it,” Cummings said. “The tide is turning in favor of larger, more affordable houses.”

Iris Lavine has been very pleased with her son’s new living situation, and the support he and all of the residents receive in regard to daily living skills.

“Aaron is making friends, and is happily adjusting,” she said.

Two more JF&CS houses are slated to open in Malden and Walpole later this year, giving more young people a unique opportunity for independence and happiness.

For more info, visit jjfcsboston.org.
Nolan and his mother, Amy Tierce, move Nolan’s belongings into a new home in Newton.