

# INSIDE NOVA

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## Out of institutions and into independent living



Hattie Maye used to live in a group home with round-the-clock supervision, but today she is living independently thanks to federal initiatives. By Delia Engstrom/For InsideNoVa.com

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**Jill Palermo |**

By any measure, Hattie Maye has a full life. She lives in her own apartment, has a boyfriend and spends five days a week working at the Community Thrift Store in Manassas, a job she's held for nearly 15 years.

But until recently, she lived the way most developmentally disabled adults do -- in a group home with lots of roommates and round-the-clock supervision from caseworkers.

That changed last October when Maye, 42, became the first disabled adult in her program to "graduate" into independent living.

Now, Hattie Maye, who asked to be identified by her first and middle names, pays her own rent and makes many of her own decisions -- like what to eat for dinner, where to go to church and when to grocery shop, do laundry or visit her friends -- all things she couldn't do with such autonomy when she lived with as many as five roommates.

She calls her new arrangement "a dream come true."

"It's excellent, wonderful. Every morning when I get up and I'm home by myself, I say, 'Thank God,' she says with a laugh. "I get so happy sometimes I start shaking my hands all over because I'm by myself. It's just peaceful."

For people like Hattie Maye, learning the skills to live independently is difficult but not impossible, says Carrie Cortez, director of Volunteers of America Chesapeake's Northern Virginia Community Living Centers, a program that coordinates housing and supportive services for local adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

"It's very, very, very rare" for clients to live by themselves, Cortez said. "But the ultimate goal for anybody is not to need our services anymore, so this is just proof that it does work."

**FEDERAL MANDATES**

VOA Chesapeake is sharing Hattie Maye's story in part because her achievement comes as services for people like her remain in transition across the commonwealth.

Virginia was one of the last states in the country to comply with a 1999 Supreme Court ruling, known as the Olmstead decision, which required that people with intellectual and developmental disabilities move out of government institutions and into less restrictive community settings.

A decade after the ruling when into effect, the U.S. Department of Justice sued Virginia for failing to adapt to the ruling's mandates. A 2012 settlement with DOJ required, among other things, that Virginia close all but one of its five "training centers," hospital-like facilities that housed hundreds of developmentally disabled adults.

The last few residents residing at the Northern Virginia Training Center, near George Mason University in Fairfax, moved into group homes earlier this year. The center formally closed its doors March 31.

But while Virginia complied with that aspect of the settlement, the state remains out of compliance with several other requirements, including that it reduce long waiting lists for "Medicaid waiver slots" that direct state funding to allow disabled individuals to live in homes or apartments with supportive services.

When the settlement was drafted nearly four years ago, there were about 6,000 people on the waiting list across Virginia. Now, there are more than 10,000.

As of January, 376 Prince William County residents were waiting for Medicaid waivers, including 158 for whom supportive residential slots were deemed "urgent," according to Lucy Beadnell, director of advocacy for the Northern Virginia Chapter of the Arc, a national nonprofit for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

"It's been a cultural divide here in Virginia, where we have the money but people with developmental disabilities were not a priority," Beadnell said.

But there is reason to hope that things will improve, Beadnell said. The state's recent redesign of its Medicaid waiver program, which is now under a 90-day federal review, promises changes that should make the kind of residential placement Hattie Maye now enjoys -- living independently with supportive services -- a reality for more eligible Virginians.

#### **'VERY PROUD'**

Before moving into her own apartment, Hattie Maye transitioned about three years ago from living in a group home with five roommates to a living in two-bedroom apartment with just one roommate.

That made a big difference, said Cortez, who has worked with Hattie Maye for about five years. She was immediately happier and learned to do more things for herself.

"It was an immediate change," Cortez said. "In the smaller setting, she just thrived, and most people do." Cortez said VOA is now moving to place more people in smaller settings because it allows clients more individualized attention from case workers and minimizes disruptions in progress.

By last fall, Hattie Maye had made such strides that a skills assessment showed she no longer qualified for a Medicaid waiver slot. To celebrate, her community service caseworkers threw her a surprise party, complete cupcakes, pink graduation decorations (her favorite color) and a recording of "Pomp and Circumstance" that played as she walked in.

Hattie Maye said she was overjoyed.

"Right then and there, I fell down to the floor. I was crying so much," she said. "I was so happy."

Hattie Maye still receives about 100 hours a month of county-funded "supportive in-home services," including help with budgeting, healthy meal-planning and transportation to work and to church.

The difference, however, is that she has more say when her caseworkers visit, which is currently four or five days a week "because I want more freedom," she says. Saturdays, for example, are reserved for visits with her boyfriend, David, who lives in a group home in Woodbridge.

Hattie Maye says she hopes to be an example to others who face similar challenges yet hope to someday live independently.

"I would say work on it and if you try really hard, you will succeed like I did," she said. "Because when I succeeded, I was very happy, very proud of myself. Everybody told me they were very proud of me."