



Press Release with Urgent Plea

Monday, February 19, 2024

Faith Friendship Villa stands as a lifeline for 74 residents in Lancaster County, PA, grappling with persistent mental illness, intellectual disabilities, and other medical challenges. Many of these individuals live on fixed and meager incomes. Our residents pay what they can afford. Thus, FFM relies heavily on charitable donations to cover nearly 50% of our operational costs. Typically, these fundraising efforts are successful, albeit not easy. This season is anything but typical. The threat to personal care homes are under-resourced and high in demand, therefore being a pillar in the community.

So, the residents' beloved home faces threat of closure due to the egregious actions of a former caretaker who inflicted abuse upon fourteen vulnerable men. The Villa is not a facility—it's a cherished community where our residents have built their lives and found solace. It's a place of stability, engagement, healing, and hope—a beacon of care for the past 22 years.

In August 2022, we were devastated to discover allegations of sexual abuse against a caretaker, someone once revered and trusted by our community. Despite shock and disbelief, we swiftly acted to protect our residents, cooperate with authorities, and conduct a thorough internal investigation. The depth of betrayal was profound, and all shared the pain, but none more than his victims.

Upon discovering that charges were to be brought against James Zook for institutional sexual assault based on the initial allegation, we recognized the urgency of the situation. Despite no formal recommendation from any involved agency, we felt compelled to take further action. Through prayerful consideration and careful discernment, we embarked on a thorough and impartial process of interviewing all our residents. With the guidance of our legal team, we meticulously crafted questions to ensure the integrity of the investigation.

To our shock, thirteen additional victims of abuse came forward. This revelation led to the filing of over six hundred and sixty-two counts of sexual abuse charges against the perpetrator, ultimately culminating in a significant prison sentence of 13-28 years. Our commitment is always to seek truth and pursue justice for our precious and vulnerable residents. We remained unwavering throughout this challenging ordeal. Our mission has never changed, even in tragic situations. God is our anchor. Our residents are a gift to cherish and care for.

As you can imagine, we have all experienced the whole gamut of emotions—shock, grief, guilt, anger, and sorrow—but our resolve to ensure the safety and continued care of our residents remains unwavering. The process between the charges being filed and the actual imprisonment of Mr. Zook seemed unending. Eighteen months. As long as he remained free, our residents felt imprisoned in fear and confusion. The devastation runs deep.

During the waiting period, our leadership provided crisis counseling and support for our residents and EAP services for our employees. We lost some staff for obvious reasons, and our committed team struggled with feelings of guilt and anger that they didn't see it. They were also exhausted from long hours and increased state scrutiny, citing us for things never cited in 15 years or more. They didn't detect the abuse either, and they are our overseers, regulators, and compliance gurus; none of us did for 14 years. We can all learn from this.



During the sentencing hearing for Jim Zook on February 15, 2024, Judge Reinaker delivered a poignant message. Drawing from his extensive experience presiding over cases like this, he highlighted the common feelings of guilt experienced by employees and loved ones of the victims. However, Judge Reinaker emphasized that the blame and responsibility lie squarely on individuals like Mr. Zook and others who commit such heinous and insidious acts.

Since this started, we've implemented *more* stringent measures to prevent such horrors from recurring. We've partnered with Praesidium to enhance our sexual abuse detection and prevention program, reinforcing our commitment to safeguarding our residents. Additionally, we've enhanced staff evaluations, updated policies, improved pay, and intensified training efforts.

But recovery takes time, and financial losses from this crisis loom large.

The potential closure of Faith Friendship Villa not only jeopardizes the well-being of our 67 remaining residents but also threatens to uproot the sense of family they've found here. Moving elderly individuals can induce "transfer trauma," exacerbating stress and health complications.

Our residents deserve better—they deserve stability and safety. Not punishment.

Our donors have stepped up their giving, but the financial losses have been significant; we need time and money to survive this. Our ability to qualify for most government grants and donations through foundations is crippled because of legal matters. The insurance company has refused to pay the claim, and legal costs mount. The cost to operate has skyrocketed due to the crisis and inflation. Our ERC – payroll tax refund of over half a million is held up in IRS coffers because they stopped processing all returns. Our equity is inaccessible for now, and donations have decreased. We need time and money if we are to survive this crisis.

Our residents do not deserve to be punished for this man's actions. They deserve justice; they deserve to keep their home. Our monthly income deficit is approximately forty thousand dollars. We cannot do this alone.

For months, behind the scenes and quietly, so as not to scare our residents whose persistent and complicated illnesses and other co-occurring disabilities could easily cause them to destabilize out of intensified fear about losing their homes, we contacted our elected officials asking for help. Individuals, businesses, and mental health professionals all have a voice in this. That said, I was encouraged when I heard Governor Josh Shapiro's address to the General Assembly a few weeks ago. One of his candid quotes that deserves repeating is:

“We must step up for the most vulnerable in our system and give a damn” - Governor Josh Shapiro – 24/25 Budget Address- General Assembly

Our Governor also mentioned more than once the need to stay true to our founding Fathers words and creed for Pennsylvania in that we “work to do what is truly wise and just”

One final quote of the Governors during his address that is worth repeating.

“My own faith teaches me that no one is required to complete the task, but neither are we free to refrain from it.”



Standing with us in ensuring that everyone, regardless of age or health, has access to a stable and nurturing home is both wise and just. It is also a demonstration of our faith for those of us who believe. Yet, regardless of your position on religion, your advocacy and support could be the lifeline that saves Faith Friendship Villa from closure and the residents from losing their home.

We need your support to keep Faith Friendship Villa operational, to continue providing care for our residents, and to give them the time and space to heal. Losing their home would inflict immeasurable harm. Below are several ways you can help. If you are a person of faith, start with prayer, because we know this is no big thing for God.

We implore state and local elected officials in Lancaster County and all concerned parties to intervene swiftly to help. Please contact our elected officials and let them know you want them to protect the residents by helping to keep Faith Friendship Villa open. Please pray that our elected officials and private donors will respond favorably and preserve the residents' housing.

You'll find links to contact them below. Every voice matters.

- 1) **Be in in prayer that the elected officials, government, community etc...will all rally with FFV.**
- 2) **Tell the elected officials to provide the financial support the Villa needs to stay open.**
- 3) **Tell them to work with FFM to learn from this crisis together and develop real policy and processes on how to coordinate best and respond to this kind of crisis.**
- 4) **Work together to find ways to increase these services for at risk citizens of PA.**

PA Governor Josh Shapiro 717-787-2500 [Contact Governor Josh Shapiro](#)

PA Rep Brett Miller (717) 295-5050 [Contact Representative Brett Miller](#)

PA Senator Ryan Aument (717) 627-0036 [Contact PA Senator Ryan Aument](#)

US Congressman Lloyd Smucker (202) 225-2411 [Contact Congressman Lloyd Smucker](#)

US Jr. Senator Fetterman 202-224-4254 [Contact US Senator Fetterman](#)
GOFUNDME set up by a residents parent: <https://gofund.me/f7a6448e>

Petition asking Governor to act: <https://www.change.org/p/stop-victim-punishment-save-faith-friendship-villa-from-closure-protect-our-residents>

For questions, comments, or to get involved further, please contact 717.285.5596 ext. 412 or home@faithfriendship.org