

THE SUN CHRONICLE



Cathy Hutchinson, left, is given the keys to her room in her group home in Taunton by A.J. Metea, the home's director. (Staff photo by Mike George)

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A place of her own

BY RICK FOSTER SUN CHRONICLE STAFF

TAUNTON - Fifteen years after a devastating stroke left her mute and a paraplegic, Cathy Hutchinson is home.

The former Attleboro woman moved into a group home with four other disabled women Friday after years in hospitals and nursing homes - and after taking a lead role in helping brain-injured patients like herself find greater independence.

"Thank you, this is wonderful," said the 58-year-old grandmother who communicates by email and by responding as individual letters are pointed out to her on a chart. "Thank you for sharing this special day. I am happy to see all of you."

Four years ago, Hutchinson was the lead plaintiff in a class action suit seeking to require the state government to allow severely brain-injured patients to be housed in homes and community residences instead of nursing homes. She is one of 87 individuals who have been approved to move from a nursing facility into the community as a result of a 2008 settlement in the lawsuit.

Hutchinson, who suffered the stroke when she was 42, said the wait has been long but worthwhile.

"This is a dream come true," she wrote in an email prior to Friday's move.

"I never knew how wonderful freedom is. I couldn't be happier."

Hutchinson, a former postal worker and avid gardener, was not expected to survive when she was rushed to a hospital after suffering a stroke in front of her two teenaged children. But intensive medical care at Massachusetts General Hospital in Boston and a strong will to live pulled her through.

Family and friends say Hutchinson, who volunteered to join four other brain injured patients in bringing the lawsuit, was motivated by more than desire to live in a normal home. She also wanted to help others suffering from similar conditions.

"I'm so proud of her," said Hutchinson's sister Geri Baldasaro, 75, of North Attleboro. "She's such an amazing person."

The class action lawsuit, filed by the Center for Public Representation and the law office of WilmerHale on behalf of the five plaintiffs, the Brain Injury Association of Massachusetts, and the Stavros Center for Independent Living, charged the Massachusetts with violating the Americans with Disabilities Act by failing to provide adequate community services. The agreement allows brain-injured patients to transfer from institutions to community residences over the next eight years.

Moving the patients from nursing homes to group homes is designed to be "cost neutral" said Pam Bush of the Brain Injury Association, meaning that it should be no more expensive than their existing form of care.

Prior to moving to Taunton, Hutchinson had spent several years in a nursing care facility in Boston. Moving closer to Attleboro will make it easier for family members to visit her sister, Baldasaro said, and provide brighter, more comfortable surroundings.

The newly-completed group home, operated by Brockton Area Multi Services, contains private rooms for each resident along with shared livingroom, dining, kitchen and bath facilities, all with adaptive equipment and accommodations such as extra-wide doorways. The women will also have two full-time staff attendants seven days a week.

The agreement and the eventual relocation of brain injured patients into community homes was hailed as a landmark by lawyers and advocates.

"This agreement is a first in the nation for people with brain injuries - regardless of the cause - and will serve as a model for other states," said Steven J. Schwartz of the Center for Public Representation, lead counsel for the plaintiffs. "For individuals with brain injury, the promise of the Americans with Disabilities Act has become a reality."

"The courageous survivors who agreed to participate in this class action lawsuit have paved the way for others with brain injuries to live life more fully, independently and with dignity," said Arlene Korab, Executive Director of the Brain Injury Association of Massachusetts.

As part of the settlement, two Medicaid home- and community-based waivers were created and the state began accepting applicants in May of 2010. A total of 300 individuals will be selected by lottery to transition from nursing homes and chronic or rehabilitation hospitals to integrated community settings during the first three years of the waiver program.