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Two new group homes open in South Salem

By Amanda McGregor
STAFF WRITER

SALEM — Two new, side-by-side houses in a Salem neighborhood are home to 10 women with developmental disabilities.

The residents are clients of Bridgewell, a North Shore nonprofit that serves people with disabilities. Neighbors, family members and friends recently attended an open house at the two homes.

"We are all so pleased to be welcomed into the neighborhood," said Robert Stearns, CEO of Bridgewell.

The homes were built, in part, due to Catholic Charities' decision to sell a home in Lynn that Bridgewell was leasing. The agency did not want to break apart the group of friends, so it purchased the property in Salem, working with the Massachusetts Department of Development Services.

"We were very happy to be able to site two new homes side by side so that the women could all stay together," said Bonnie Smarsh, assistant director of residential services at Bridgewell. In addition to allowing the six women from the previous group home stay together, the space allowed Bridgewell to transfer another client and accept three new residents.

Five women, ranging in age from 22 to 70, live in each house.

The two houses are on a side street off Loring Avenue near the Forest River Conservation Area. Seventeen staff members, including a part-time registered nurse, work at the new homes, which are one-story, handicapped-accessible houses with wide hallways, large bedrooms to accommodate medical equipment, two handicapped-accessible bathrooms and an extra-large garage to accommodate wheelchair vans.

Bridgewell, formerly known as the Greater Lynn Mental Health and Retardation Association, is a private agency that serves developmentally and psychiatrically disabled people. It operates 64 group homes.