22-56181

IN THE UNITED STATES COURT OF APPEALS

FOR THE NINTH CIRCUIT

THE OHIO HOUSE, LLC,

Plaintiff-Appellant,

v.

CITY OF COSTA MESA,

Defendant-Appellee.

On Appeal from the United States District Court
for the Central District of California

Case No. 8:19-cv-01710-JVS-GJS
Hon. James V. Selna, District Judge

BRIEF OF AMICI CURIAE THE CALIFORNIA CIVIL RIGHTS DEPARTMENT AND THE CALIFORNIA DEPARTMENT OF HOUSING AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT IN SUPPORT OF APPELLANT AND REVERSAL

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INTRODUCTION AND INTERESTS OF AMICI

Californians have the right to obtain and hold housing of their choice without discrimination based on disability. Cal. Gov't Code §§ 12920-12921.[1] In fact, California law requires local governments to take affirmative actions to further opportunities for people with disabilities to live where they choose, in housing that meets their particular needs. These rights and requirements are enumerated in several state laws, including the California Fair Employment and Housing Act (FEHA, *id*. §§ 12900-12999) and its implementing regulations; the Housing Element Law (*id*. §§ 65580-65589.11); the Land Use Anti-Discrimination Law (*id*. § 65008); and the Affirmatively Furthering Fair Housing Law (*id*. § 8899.50).

The California Civil Rights Department (CRD, formerly known as the Department of Fair Employment and Housing) is the state agency charged with enforcing California's civil rights laws, including the fair housing protections in FEHA. In exercising this authority, CRD has promulgated comprehensive regulations implementing FEHA, *see, e.g.*, Cal. Code Regs. tit. 2, §§ 12005-12271, and has investigated and prosecuted civil actions under FEHA in state and federal court, *see* Gov't Code § 12930(e)-(j). CRD

[1] All statutory citations are to the California Codes unless otherwise indicated.

thus has a strong interest in the proper application of FEHA standards in housing discrimination cases in California.

The California Department of Housing and Community Development (HCD) is the state agency responsible for enforcing housing laws in California, and has "primary responsibility for development and implementation of housing policy." Health & Safety Code § 50152; *see also* Gov't Code § 65585(j). HCD's responsibilities also include advising cities on state housing law and policy, developing guidelines on "housing elements" and other housing law issues, and reviewing each local government's housing element for substantial compliance with the Housing Element Law. Health & Safety Code §§ 50456, 50459, 50464; Gov't Code § 65585(a)-(e). One of HCD's recent initiatives to carry this mandate out is its Group Home Technical Advisory, which was issued in 2022 in response to legal concerns around some local governments' adoption of new zoning regulations for group homes—housing shared by people with disabilities that provides support for the residents' disability-related needs—and explained

how these regulations can conflict with state law.[2] HCD thus has a strong interest in the proper application of state housing laws and their interaction with FEHA, including in the area of group homes.[3]

As discussed further below, it appears to amici that the district court failed to properly apply the broad protections California law affords people with disabilities with respect to housing. Amici therefore respectfully submit this brief to aid this Court's consideration of the important state law issues this case presents.

ARGUMENT

California law protects people with disabilities from housing discrimination, and requires cities to take affirmative actions in their land-use rules to advance the ability of people with disabilities to live in neighborhoods of their choice and in residential settings that address their

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[2] This document is available on the Department's website at https://www.hcd.ca.gov/sites/default/files/docs/planning-and-community/group-home-technical-advisory-2022.pdf.

[3] No party's counsel authored this brief in whole or in part; no party or party's counsel contributed money that was intended to fund preparing or submitting this brief; and no person other than the amici curiae contributed money that was intended to fund preparing or submitting this brief. *See* Fed. R. App. P. 29(a)(4)(E). Amici have filed a motion for leave along with this brief, as the City of Costa Mesa refused to consent to the filing. *See* Fed. R. App. P. 29(a)(2).

particular disability-related needs. As one aspect of that statutory and regulatory scheme, FEHA requires courts to carefully scrutinize local land use laws, like Costa Mesa's, that facially discriminate against group homes for people with disabilities. Such laws are permissible only if they objectively benefit people with disabilities and are the least restrictive means of achieving the municipality's policy objectives. The judgment below should be reversed because Costa Mesa failed to make such a showing, and also failed to satisfy FEHA's reasonable-accommodation requirements. Ordinances like Costa Mesa's not only violate fundamental principles of state housing and antidiscrimination law; they are also contrary to California's critical public policy goals and do real harm to people with disabilities.[4]

I. CALIFORNIA LAW PROHIBITS HOUSING DISCRIMINATION AGAINST PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES

FEHA and its regulations expressly prohibit housing discrimination against protected classes of individuals, including people with disabilities. FEHA's protection includes its incorporation of other state housing laws as a

[4] As Appellant's opening brief explains, it appears that federal law may require reversal as well. But amici will address only certain state law issues in this brief.

potential basis for liability. In addition, the California Constitution provides a privacy right that extends to group housing.

A. FEHA and Its Implementing Regulations Prohibit Land Use Practices that Discriminate Against People with Disabilities

FEHA provides comprehensive protection against housing and employment discrimination in California. Gov't Code §§ 12900-12999. It establishes as a "civil right" the "opportunity to seek, obtain, and hold housing without discrimination" on the basis of a number of enumerated protected characteristics. *Id.* § 12921(b). FEHA prohibits specific unlawful housing practices, including discrimination or harassment generally, retaliation, otherwise making unavailable or denying a dwelling based on discrimination, and discriminating through public or private land use practices. *Id.* § 12955; *see id*. § 12955(*l*) ("Discrimination includes, but is not limited to, restrictive covenants, zoning laws, denials of use permits, and other actions authorized under the Planning and Zoning Law . . . that make housing opportunities unavailable."). FEHA defines "discrimination" to include the "refusal to make reasonable accommodations in rules, policies, practices, or services when these accommodations may be necessary to afford a disabled person equal opportunity to use and enjoy a dwelling." *Id*. § 12927(c)(1).

FEHA prohibits discrimination based on, among other characteristics, disability, and "includes a perception that the person has any of those characteristics or that the person is associated with a person who has, or is perceived to have, any of those characteristics." Gov't Code § 12955(m). Individuals recovering from addiction are recognized as people with disabilities, *see id.* § 12926(j), and "sober living homes and other dwellings intended for occupancy by persons recovering from alcoholism and drug addiction are protected from illegal discrimination against the disabled." *Socal Recovery, LLC v. City of Costa Mesa*, 56 F.4th 802, 814 (9th Cir. 2023).

FEHA and its federal law counterpart, the Fair Housing Act (FHA), 42 U.S.C. §§ 3601-3631, are related but offer distinct sets of protections. California courts applying FEHA "'often follow decisions construing federal antidiscrimination statutes, as long as those decisions provide appropriate guidance.'" *Walker v. City of Lakewood*, 272 F.3d 1114, 1126 (9th Cir. 2001) (quoting *Sada v. Robert F. Kennedy Med. Ctr.*, 56 Cal. App. 4th 138, 150 n.6 (1997)). Thus, in some instances, this Court "'appl[ies] the same standards to FHA and FEHA claims.'" *Pac. Shores Props., LLC v. City of Newport Beach*, 730 F.3d 1142, 1156 n.14 (9th Cir. 2013) (quoting *Walker*, 272 F.2d at 1131 n.8). But FEHA has force independent of the FHA, and in

certain situations it "may provide greater protection against discrimination"—that is, "the FHA provides a minimum level of protection that FEHA may exceed." *Auburn Woods I Homeowners Ass'n v. Fair Emp't & Hous. Comm'n*, 121 Cal. App. 4th 1578, 1591 (2004) (quoting *Brown v. Smith*, 55 Cal. App. 4th 767, 780 (1997)); *see also, e.g.*, *Page v. Super. Ct.*, 31 Cal. App. 4th 1206, 1215-16 (1995) (declining to follow federal decisions that would limit supervisor's personal liability under California antidiscrimination statute); *Martinez v. City of Clovis*, 90 Cal. App. 5th 193, 254-73 (2023) (analyzing FEHA claim separately from FHA claim), *petition for review pending*, No. S280039 (Cal.).

Pursuant to its legislative authority, *see* Gov't Code § 12935(a), CRD has promulgated regulations implementing FEHA. These "quasi-legislative" regulations, which "have the dignity of statutes" under principles of California administrative law, *Yamaha Corp. of Am. v. State Bd. of Equalization*, 19 Cal. 4th 1, 10-11 (1998), are relevant to this case in at least three respects.

First, the FEHA regulations incorporate acts under other state housing laws into the definition of "[p]ublic land use practices" that can be challenged as discriminatory under FEHA. Cal. Code Regs. tit. 2, § 12005(bb). The regulations define "[p]ublic land use practices" to include

"all practices by governmental entities . . . in connection with development and land use that are related to or have an effect on existing or proposed dwellings or housing opportunities." *Id.*[5] The FEHA regulations specifically prohibit discriminatory treatment and discriminatory effects in such land use practices. *Id*. §§ 12161-12162. The regulations' definition of "land use practices" thus covers a broad range of potential public action, and prohibits such actions that make housing opportunities unavailable for people with disabilities and impose different requirements on a protected class, if the practice intentionally discriminates against or has a discriminatory effect on members of the protected class. *Id.* §§ 12005(bb), 12161(a)-(b).

Second, when a public entity's land use policy is facially discriminatory—as is the case with Costa Mesa's ordinances here, *see infra* at 14—the entity must make two specific showings to avoid liability. It must establish that the policy both "[o]bjectively benefits a protected class" *and*

[5] These practices include, among other things, adoption of ordinances, permitting and zoning decisions, actions under the Housing Element Law (part of the California Planning and Zoning Law and the State Housing Law, both cited in the regulation), and "[a]ll practices that could affect the availability, feasibility, use, or enjoyment of housing opportunities." Cal. Code Regs., tit. 2, § 12005(bb).

"[i]s the least restrictive means of achieving the identified purpose." Cal. Code Regs. tit. 2, § 12042(f)(1)(A), (f)(2).[6]

Third, the FEHA regulations also implement the statute's reasonable accommodation requirement. *See* Gov't Code § 12927(c)(1). As applicable to zoning and permitting cases, a public entity must "make reasonable accommodations unless providing the requested accommodation would constitute an undue financial and administrative burden or a fundamental alteration of its program." Cal. Code Regs. tit. 2, § 12176(c); *see* Gov't Code § 12927(c)(1) (discrimination can include failure to make reasonable accommodations).[7] Moreover, the regulations require that whenever a public entity cannot immediately grant a reasonable accommodation request, it must undertake a good-faith interactive process "to exchange information to

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[6] In addition, or as an alternative, to demonstrating an "objective benefit," an entity may also show the policy "[r]esponds to legitimate safety concerns raised by the individuals affected by the facially discriminatory policy, rather than being based on stereotypes about them." Cal. Code Regs. tit. 2, § 12042(f)(1)(B). Here, the district court found the City had not offered any such concerns at trial to justify its regulations. ER 10.

[7] A proposed accommodation constitutes a "fundamental alteration" only if it would "change the essential nature of the services or operations of the person being asked to provide the accommodation or modification," and cannot be denied based on "fears or prejudices" about the disability, or because it "might possibly become an undue burden if extended to multiple other individuals who might request accommodations or modifications." Cal. Code Regs. tit. 2, § 12179(e)-(f).

identify, evaluate, and implement a reasonable accommodation or modification that allows the individual with a disability equal opportunity." Cal. Code Regs. tit. 2, § 12177(a). This includes affirmatively "identify[ing] if there is another accommodation or modification that is equally effective." *Id.* § 12177(c).

In addition to these regulatory provisions, FEHA's prohibition of actions that "make housing opportunities unavailable" based on protected characteristics, Gov't Code § 12955(*l*), is informed by state laws that require local jurisdictions to plan for and accommodate adequate housing opportunities for all individuals. A key aspect of the Planning and Zoning Law, Gov't Code §§ 65000-66499.58, is the requirement that local governments prepare a housing element, *see id*. § 65582(f). In that document, cities must thoroughly analyze fair housing issues related to housing for people with disabilities and set forth a program of actions that protect and promote such housing, as well as meaningfully, quantifiably, and affirmatively further fair housing. *Id*. § 65583.[8] Among other requirements,

[8] '"Affirmatively furthering fair housing"' is defined under California law to include "taking meaningful actions, in addition to combating discrimination, that overcome patterns of segregation and foster inclusive communities free from barriers that restrict access to opportunity based on

the housing element must "demonstrate local efforts to remove governmental constraints that hinder . . . meeting the need for housing for persons with disabilities," *id.* § 65583(a)(5), and must "remove constraints to, and provide reasonable accommodations for housing designed for, intended for occupancy by, or with supportive services for, persons with disabilities," *id.* § 65583(c)(3). It must include a fair housing assessment with specific goals, implementation strategies, and "metrics and milestones" for evaluating results. *Id.* § 65583(c)(10)(A)(iv). Notably, to satisfy these obligations, cities are required to use and adduce data, analyses, and quantitative objectives. *See, e.g.*, *id.* § 65583(a)(5), (a)(7), (b)(1), & (c)(10)(A)(ii). In other words, numerous provisions of state housing law address the adequacy of local policies in protecting and promoting housing opportunities for people with disabilities.

Recently, the California Court of Appeal held that local governmental actions that violate the Planning and Zoning Law (including the Housing Element Law) and make housing opportunities unavailable to members of a protected class also violate FEHA. *Martinez*, 90 Cal. App. 5th at 268-71. The court concluded that the plaintiff had stated a FEHA claim by pleading

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protected characteristics." Gov't Code § 8899.50(a)(1) (internal quotation marks in original).

that a local government's failure to comply with the Housing Element Law "'make[s] housing opportunities unavailable' as that phrase is used in . . . section 12955, subdivision (*l*)." *Id.* at 269. *Martinez* thus underscores that one important aspect of FEHA's housing-related protections stems from the statute's interaction with other state housing laws.

B. California's Constitutional Privacy Right Protects Group Home Residents

In addition to these state statutory and regulatory provisions, the California Constitution provides protections for people with disabilities living in communal, group home settings that courts must consider when examining local ordinances. This protection stems from Article I, Section 1 of the California Constitution, which declares an "inalienable right[]" to (among other things) "privacy."

In *City of Santa Barbara v. Adamson*, 27 Cal. 3d 123 (1980), the California Supreme Court held that this constitutional privacy right prohibited a city ordinance that disallowed more than five persons unrelated by blood or marriage from living in a communal setting. *Id.* at 134. The court explained that the state Constitution protects a "right of privacy not only in one's family but also in one's home . . . [and] the right to live with whomever one wishes." *Id.* at 130; *see also Coal. Advocating Legal Hous.*

Options v. City of Santa Monica, 88 Cal. App. 4th 451, 458-61 (2001) (rejecting city's limitations on who may live in an accessory dwelling unit because "the right to choose with whom to live is fundamental").

This protection is relevant here because of the importance of communal living arrangements to people with disabilities. Group homes can provide peer support for disability-related needs, help people with disabilities live in deinstitutionalized settings, and integrate residents into their communities. *See* Group Home Technical Advisory at 1, 6. As a result, the California Legislature has recognized that "'persons with disabilities . . . are significantly more likely than other persons to live with unrelated persons in group [homes].'" *Broadmoor San Clemente Homeowners Ass'n v. Nelson*, 25 Cal. App. 4th 1, 6 (1994) (quoting 1992 Cal. Stat., ch. 1277, § 18, and 12 West Cal. Legis. Serv. 6038 (legislative finding and declaration in statute relating to fair housing)).

II. THE JUDGMENT BELOW SHOULD BE REVERSED BECAUSE COSTA MESA'S ORDINANCES VIOLATE CALIFORNIA LAW

The district court failed to properly apply the state law principles just discussed, and there was no legally sufficient evidentiary basis for a reasonable jury to find for Costa Mesa, necessitating reversal.

A. Costa Mesa Failed to Make the Showings Necessary to Sustain Its Facially Discriminatory Ordinances Under FEHA

Costa Mesa's ordinances at issue here apply to "group homes," which are defined as dwellings "being used as a supportive living environment for persons who are considered handicapped under state or federal law." ER 251. As the district court correctly recognized, *see* ER 252, this scheme is a "'[f]acially discriminatory policy'" because it "explicitly conditions a housing opportunity on a protected basis, takes adverse action based on a protected basis, or directs adverse action to be taken based on a protected basis." Cal. Code Regs. tit. 2, § 12040(c) (internal quotation marks in original). Thus, to avoid liability here, Costa Mesa bore the burden of establishing both that its law "[o]bjectively benefits a protected class," *id.* § 12042(f)(1)(A), and that it "[i]s the least restrictive means of achieving the identified purpose," *id.* § 12042(f)(2). Costa Mesa did not satisfy either prong of this analysis.

"Objectively benefits a protected class." Costa Mesa's counterintuitive argument that its ordinances, which facially discriminate against group homes, in fact "objectively *benefit*" people with disabilities, ER 6-10, suffers from two key flaws.

First, the gravamen of Costa Mesa's successful "benefits" argument was that its policy purportedly advantages group homes by allowing them to avoid the restrictions the City places on "boarding houses"—*i.e.*, a 1,000-foot spacing requirement, exclusion from a single-family residential zone, and "a six-person and six-room limit." *See, e.g.*, ER 6-10. But a comparison between group homes for people with disabilities and boarding houses is inapt. The communal living, peer support, and other assistance that group homes provide are essential housing resources for people with disabilities, who may not be able to live without them, unlike the non-disabled residents of boarding houses. *Oconomowoc Residential Programs, Inc. v. City of Milwaukee*, 300 F.3d 775, 787 (7th Cir. 2002). Thus, group homes, unlike boarding houses, are protected by state and federal fair housing laws. *See e.g.*, *Broadmoor San Clemente Homeowners Ass'n*, 25 Cal. App. 4th. at 6; Group Home Technical Advisory at 24.

The City has failed to carry its burden to justify its regulations in this case, because treating people with disabilities who require group homes slightly better than "boarding house" residents is irrelevant. *See Oconomowoc*, 300 F.3d at 787. Costa Mesa's regulations placing burdens and restrictions on group homes do not result in a "benefit" to people with disabilities, who have needs addressed by group homes that people without

disabilities who live in boarding houses do not share. Nor has the City shown that it would actually be lawful to impose on group homes the restrictions it imposes on boarding houses, or that Ohio House and other group homes would not be entitled to reasonable accommodations from them. The "benefits" defense based on a comparison to boarding houses fails as a matter of law.

Costa Mesa's restrictions on group homes also conflict with the City's obligations under state law to affirmatively further fair housing for people with disabilities and account for their particular needs. Among other deficiencies, the City's policy fails to account for the "special housing needs" of "persons with disabilities," Gov't Code § 65583(a)(7); fails to "remove governmental constraints" on housing for people with disabilities, *id.* § 65583(a)(5); and fails to give "highest priority" to factors that "limit or deny fair housing choice or access to opportunity" for people with disabilities, *id.* § 65583(c)(10)(A)(iv). These failures may well independently violate FEHA by virtue of making housing opportunities unavailable to people with disabilities. *See Martinez*, 90 Cal. App. 5th at 268-70; *supra* at 10-12. At a minimum, however, they should foreclose Costa Mesa's argument that its facially discriminatory ordinances somehow objectively benefit people with disabilities.

The City seeks to distinguish Ohio House from other shared housing that it treats like single-family homes because not all of its occupants are joint owners or tenants. ER 5606, 5918. But in *Adamson*, the Court held that the California Constitution's protection of privacy rights still applies when a property owner or primary tenant (like Ohio House) is renting out rooms for others to live in a communal setting. *See Adamson*, 27 Cal. 3d at 127-28, 136 & n.5; *City of Santa Barbara v. Adamson*, 90 Cal. App. 3d 606, 153 Cal. Rptr. 507, 509 (1979) (confirming that Adamson was renting space in her house to the other occupants). In addition, group homes like Ohio House, in which the occupants are not joint owners or tenants, are well-established and important communal housing resources for people with disabilities.[9] It is incongruous to suggest that restrictions contradicting state constitutional rights could provide a legally cognizable "benefit" to people who live in group homes.

Second, in addition to the legal inadequacy of the alleged benefits themselves, Costa Mesa failed to meet its burden to produce sufficient

[9] *See* Group Home Technical Advisory at 24-25; Polcin et al., *Sober Living Houses for Alcohol and Drug Dependence: 18-Month Outcomes*, J. of Substance Abuse Treatment (2010); 38(4):356-365, at 2-4, https://tinyurl.com/2ba5ccbw.

evidence of the imposed restrictions' supposed benefit to people with disabilities. This failure is inconsistent with California's housing laws, which require public agencies to take meaningful actions to affirmatively further fair housing and to make related assessments in their planning, supported by objective, quantifiable data. Gov't Code §§ 8899.50, 65583(c)(10)(A). This includes an obligation to assess displacement risk, *id.* § 65583(c)(10)(A)(ii); analyze potential and actual governmental constraints on housing for people with disabilities and demonstrate efforts to remove constraints, *id.* § 65583(a)(5); perform a quantifiable analysis of housing needs for people with disabilities, *id.* § 65583(a)(7); state goals and quantified objectives relative to affirmatively furthering fair housing, *id.* § 65583(b)(1); address and work to remove constraints on housing for people with disabilities, *id.* § 65583(c)(3); and promote housing for people with disabilities, *id.* § 65583(c)(5).

Instead, the City's "benefits" defense relied on subjective, speculative, and unsubstantiated opinions that people with disabilities could benefit from the City's policy both allowing for the siting of group homes where they purportedly would not otherwise be allowed if they were regulated as "boarding houses," and requiring 650-foot separation to prevent potential feelings of institutionalization for group home residents. *See, e.g.*, ER 7-10.

Related, the City failed to fully consider and support with sufficient evidence, for example, the extent to which its policy precludes group homes in areas or locations where they otherwise would be sited, or already have been sited, ignoring the creation of new constraints on housing for people with disabilities. And the City failed to fully consider and support with sufficient evidence whether more housing opportunities of their choice for the protected class would be in fact lost rather than gained as a result of the policy, including ignoring displacement risks. As a result, the district court lacked the requisite objective evidence, such as detailed quantitative data, studies, or assessments of what the needs of people with disabilities were or what the actual effects of the City's group home policy would be. *See generally* ER 6-10; *see also* Cal. Code Regs. tit. 2, § 12042(f)(1)(A) (requiring defendants to show that a facially discriminatory housing policy "[o]bjectively benefits a protected class"). Indeed, what is known about the ordinances' actual effects undermines the City's claim, despite the lack of detailed quantitative studies. Those effects will include displacing dozens of people from their Ohio House homes and effectively imposing quotas on how many people recovering from addiction can live in each of the City's various neighborhoods, and therefore in the City as a whole.

"Least restrictive means." Even if Costa Mesa had been able to show that its ordinances objectively benefit people with disabilities, it would also have had to establish that its policy "[i]s the least restrictive means of achieving the identified purpose." Cal. Code Regs. tit. 2, § 12042(f)(2); *Pack v. Fort Washington II*, 689 F. Supp. 2d 1237, 1243-44, 1248 (E.D. Cal. 2009) (granting summary adjudication on FEHA facial discrimination claim because rule was not the least restrictive means of achieving alleged purpose and noting possible alternative rule).

The City did not demonstrate with sufficient evidence that it was unable to achieve its central claimed purpose—avoiding the creation of institutionalized living in residentially zoned areas—by less restrictive means than it chose. Again, assuming for purposes of discussion that the City's goal of limiting "institutionalization" was legitimate, the district court failed to scrutinize, for example, the City's claimed need for at least 650 feet of space between group homes as the least restrictive means of achieving this purpose. *See, e.g.*, ER 8-9 (lack of discussion of possible less restrictive alternatives the jury could have considered). This constitutes an independent ground for invalidating the City's facially discriminatory ordinances.

B. Costa Mesa Failed to Demonstrate Compliance with FEHA Reasonable Accommodation Requirements

Apart from having enacted facially discriminatory ordinances, the record here shows that Costa Mesa violated FEHA by failing to make a reasonable accommodation for Ohio House, which requested that it be permitted to operate within 550 feet of another group home rather than the minimum 650 feet required by the City's ordinance. This failure has two aspects. First, as specified in FEHA's regulations, Costa Mesa was required to undertake a good-faith interactive process in response to Ohio House's request for reasonable accommodation. Cal. Code Regs. tit. 2, § 12177. This includes evaluating and implementing a reasonable accommodation if possible, or *affirmatively* "identify[ing] if there is another accommodation or modification that is equally effective." *Id.* § 12177(a), (c). It appears that the City did not make these interactive efforts and the district court did not consider these requirements when determining there was sufficient evidence to find the denial of a reasonable accommodation did not violate FEHA. *See* ER 2892-97; ER 16.

Second, as relevant here, a requested accommodation may only be denied if it would constitute an unacceptable "fundamental alteration," meaning it would "change the essential nature of the services or operations"

being offered. Cal. Code Regs. tit. 2, § 12179(b)(1), (e). And, a reasonable accommodation request cannot be denied based on "fears or prejudices" about the disability, or because it "might possibly become an undue burden if extended to multiple other individuals who might request accommodations or modifications." *Id.* § 12179(f).

"Fundamental alteration." The court found that the jury had sufficient evidence to determine that a waiver of the 650-foot separation requirement constituted a "fundamental alteration" of the City's zoning code creating residential neighborhoods. This was based on City testimony that a "cluster of group homes increases the number of adults living in an area, which increase[s] parking and traffic, [and] leads to increased related complaints," such that "[t]he City wanted to reduce these effects to prevent the 'institutionalization' of residential neighborhoods and the degradation of the residential nature." ER 16.

Assuming only for purposes of argument that the City's goal was legitimate, the court's order did not discuss any sufficient evidence showing that a deviation from the 650-foot separation rule would lead to these negative results, let alone any sufficient evidence that the 100-foot departure from the rule that Ohio House requested would do so. Indeed, Ohio House had already been located 550 feet from another group home, and there was

no sufficient evidence discussed that this had created an institutionalized setting.

Moreover, the City's concerns are a far cry from what are properly considered fundamental alterations. FEHA and its regulations specifically anticipate that cities will need to adjust their zoning codes to reasonably accommodate disability-related housing needs, Gov't Code § 12927(c)(1); Cal. Code Regs tit. 2, § 12180(c)(6), undercutting the City's argument that the claimed speculative effects of increased density alleged here could be considered fundamental alterations. Here, the allegations of increased parking needs, van traffic, and loading and unloading passengers,[10] which could come from any home with several residents—such as a multi-generational family living together, a home that receives a large number of deliveries or visitors, or families with regular carpools—is unlikely to rise to the level of changing the "essential nature" of a residentially-zoned neighborhood. Because these effects can be caused by many different sources, they should be addressed by generally applicable parking regulations, traffic calming measures, or occupancy standards instead of

[10] The district court acknowledged that Ohio House did not receive any specific noise, parking, or smoking complaints in the past. ER 16.

singling out group homes with discriminatory and constraining regulations. *See*, *e.g.*, *Adamson*, 27 Cal. 3d at 133; Group Home Technical Advisory at 30-31.

The City's reaction to its claimed concerns also did not consider its obligations under state law to affirmatively furthering fair housing. These obligations include, among other things, protecting individuals with disabilities' right to housing of their choice, and the housing they find most suitable for their disability-related needs, while removing constraints on their ability to obtain this housing. *See*, *e.g.*, Gov't Code §§ 8899.50; 65583(a)(5), (c)(3), (c)(5), (c)(10)(A). The accommodation Ohio House has requested may be consistent with, and indeed required by, state housing law. The district court's failure to consider the requested accommodation in light of the City's obligations under state law was error.

"Fears or prejudices." To justify denying the accommodation, Costa Mesa argued that having a greater number of persons per household, like Ohio House does, strained the City's infrastructure, and could create "institutionalization" of zoned residential neighborhoods. ER 16. But this argument, rather than justifying denying Ohio House's accommodation request, appears to reflect a concern that other group homes might seek a similar accommodation in the future. It thus appears to rest on "fears or

prejudices" that multiple group homes might seek reasonable accommodations to locate or remain in Costa Mesa, and that group home residents somehow cause uniquely problematic traffic, noise, or activity (as the City allows similar traffic, noise, and activity from other homes with several residents). That is precisely the kind of prejudicial reasoning FEHA rejects. *Cf. Oconomowoc*, 300 F.3d at 786 (noting that FHA rejects city actions based on "blanket stereotypes about disabled persons rather than particularized concerns about individual residents . . . the use of stereotypes and ignorance, and . . . [g]eneralized perceptions about disabilities and unfounded speculations about threats to safety . . . as grounds to justify exclusion") (internal citations and quotation marks omitted).

III. RESTRICTIVE ZONING CODES LIKE COSTA MESA'S ARE CONTRARY TO PUBLIC POLICY AND HAVE A NEGATIVE IMPACT ON HOUSING FOR CALIFORNIANS WITH DISABILITIES

As discussed above, group homes are an essential resource for people with disabilities. Group homes that provide sober living environments play a key role in substance abuse recovery care.[11] They are "alcohol and drug free living environments that offer peer support for recovery outside the context

[11] U.S. Dep't of Health & Human Servs., *Facing Addiction in America: The Surgeon General's Report on Alcohol, Drugs, and Health* (2016) at 4-4, https://tinyurl.com/ssnem8v3.

of treatment."[12] According to the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, community support "is a critical aspect of achieving and maintaining recovery," and thus, recovery residences "are uniquely qualified to assist individuals in all phases of recovery, especially those in early recovery, by furnishing social capital and recovery supports."[13] Research demonstrates that residents show improvement in a variety of areas, including drug and alcohol use, employment, psychiatric symptoms, and arrests.[14] Group homes thus enable people with disabilities to live in the community while still receiving the needed support for continued recovery.

As discussed above, California law recognizes the important benefits group homes provide to people with disabilities by establishing certain protections for them—protections that ordinances like Costa Mesa's fail to

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[12] Polcin et al., *What Did We Learn from Our Study on Sober Living Houses and Where Do We Go from Here?* J. of Psychoactive Drugs (Dec. 2010) 42(4):425-433, at 2, https://tinyurl.com/yzcxmb3r.

[13] Substance Abuse and Mental Health Servs. Admin., *Recovery Housing: Best Practices and Suggested Guidelines* (2018) at 3, https://tinyurl.com/mr4c4arz.

[14] Korcha et al., *Sober Living Houses: Research in Northern and Southern California,* Addiction Science & Clinical Practice (2015) 10 (Suppl. 1):A30, https://tinyurl.com/rh8prtbw.

recognize. In addition to the problems inherent in the City's overall permitting requirements, the Group Home Technical Advisory explains how Costa Mesa's other, more specific group home regulations conflict with its duties to avoid discriminating against such housing and to affirmatively promote and protect it. These regulations include, for example, the City's 650-foot spacing requirement, definition of single housekeeping units, and special occupancy standards for group homes.[15] Discriminatory restrictions like these and others in Costa Mesa's ordinances "can block new group homes from opening, force existing ones to close, and impose costs, legal fees, and administrative burdens that make it difficult for group homes to operate."[16]

These problems are not hypothetical. Restrictive zoning codes have had—and continue to have—a negative impact on the availability of this important type of housing opportunity for people with disabilities.[17] As an initial matter, recent research demonstrates that group homes for those recovering from addiction are not highly concentrated in Orange County,

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[15] *See generally* Group Home Technical Advisory at 23-36.

[16] *Id.* at 1.

[17] Group Home Technical Advisory at 7.

relative to the rest of California or the nation as a whole.[18] In fact, California is behind many other states in the number of such group homes per capita, despite having a higher age-adjusted alcohol/drug mortality rate than many other states.[19] Moreover, the last two years have seen a large percentage increase in the number of such deaths in California, indicating a likely increasing need for group homes in the State at a time when there are fewer homes per capita than many other states.[20]

Restrictive zoning codes can limit this number even further, as is evident from Costa Mesa's own data. Before Costa Mesa adopted its group home ordinances, it estimated there were 94 sober living homes in the City's residential zones. *Socal Recovery, LLC*, 56 F.4th at 806.[21] As of 2022, the City counted only 16 group homes, with at least 68 having closed. *Id.* at 806

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[18] Mericle et al., *Identifying the Availability of Recovery Housing in the U.S.: The NSTARR Project*, Drug and Alcohol Dependence 230 (2022), at 6-8, figs. 1, 2, tbl. 1, https://tinyurl.com/y48mpfze.

[19] *Id.* at tbl. 1.

[20] Fusion Ctr., *Data Brief: 2020 and 2021 Increases in Deaths in California*, Cal. Dep't of Pub. Health (July 1, 2022), at 8, 9, tbl. 2, https://tinyurl.com/4bbcb5d4.

[21] The *SoCal Recovery* decision cites data from the city website: *City Approved Sober Living/Group Homes*, https://tinyurl.com/yukycasy. That decision did not consider the validity of the City's ordinances.

& nn.6-7. The City's closure list now includes 83 closed facilities, indicating that an additional 15 facilities may have closed.[22]

The expert evidence in this case confirms this alarming reduction in available housing for people with disabilities. Professor Brian Connolly concluded that the City's ordinances restricted the availability of group homes; some were even forced to close, displacing people with disabilities. *See* Connolly Expert Rep. at 53 (Feb. 14, 2022), ECF No. 249-3. His report also discusses how the closure of such facilities, as with other areas of the housing market, presumptively increases the cost of housing in remaining group homes. *Id.* at 54.

In short, restrictive zoning codes, such as those at issue here in Costa Mesa, constrain housing opportunities and choice for people with disabilities. This expressly contravenes FEHA, the State's housing and planning laws, the mission of CRD and HCD, and the policy of the State of California.

CONCLUSION

The judgment of the district court should be reversed.

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[22] *Group Homes/Sober Living Information and Application*, Costa Mesa, https://tinyurl.com/4wjhb6ky (providing information on "Operators that have closed"). The list can be found at https://tinyurl.com/2absudwh.

Dated: June 29, 2023

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UNITED STATES COURT OF APPEALS
FOR THE NINTH CIRCUIT

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I hereby certify that, on this 29th day of June 2023, I electronically filed the foregoing ***BRIEF OF AMICI CURIAE THE CALIFORNIA CIVIL RIGHTS DEPARTMENT AND THE CALIFORNIA DEPARTMENT OF HOUSING AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT IN SUPPORT OF APPELLANT AND REVERSAL*** with the Clerk of the Court of the United States Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit by using the CM/ECF system. I further certify that all participants in the case are registered CM/ECF users and that service will be accomplished by the CM/ECF system.

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