



History of Community Building in Supportive Housing

This document may be used as a training tool to give staff and tenants perspective on the importance of building community in supportive housing programs.

- The earliest supportive housing projects evolved out of efforts in the 1960's and 70's to provide social services to people living in Single Room Occupancy hotels (SROs). In these SROs, single people with a variety of disabilities lived in extreme deprivation where crime and violence were a way of life. Despite the fact that many of these tenants were marginalized from their families and the rest of society, their relationships with others in the building were often remarkably stable. Social workers were surprised to discover relationships of mutual aid and protection, where people depended on one another for support and protection.
- Social workers in the first supportive SROs found that by helping people to form relationships in the buildings, their work was augmented. Fostering positive supportive relationships among tenants resulted in a greater sense of belonging, enhanced self-esteem, increased use of social services, decreased isolation, provided increased safety, and for some, more confidence to engage in other relationships outside the residence.
- In many of these buildings, a variety of behavioral norms had been established — often many of them negative. In bringing tenants together, these norms were often the subject of discussion and something that people wanted to influence. The involvement of the tenancy in establishing and promoting behavioral norms around such things as respect for people and property, tolerable and intolerable behaviors and styles of interaction was key to successfully shifting these cultures.
- In these initial efforts, a tenant's decision to participate in services was voluntary. Meetings and group gatherings afforded opportunities for tenants to “check out” workers in a low demand setting and workers could establish relationships with tenants around less personal and sensitive topics, often opening the door for discussions on more complicated issues such as mental illness and substance use issues.
- As the communities in the SROs developed and identified goals that required more planning and organizing to accomplish, the workers helped tenants learn the skills to accomplish these tasks. Being able to impact their living environment empowered tenants to take action in other areas of their lives such as work, family and health. As the norms of the buildings more closely approximated those of the surrounding neighborhood, tenants found it easier to go outside of their homes and engage in other activities in the community.

Note: This document is included within the *Supportive Services* section of CSH's *Toolkit for Developing and Operating Supportive Housing*, which is available at www.csh.org/toolkit2. This document has been adapted from the HUD-funded curriculum *Community Building in and around Supportive Housing*, which is available at www.csh.org/training.