



Community Building in Supportive Housing Developments

What Is a Community?

A community is a group of people who have common interests. Characteristics of a strong community include:

- A friendly environment
- Concern for each other's safety and property
- Mutual support and respect
- Shared goals

When tenants and staff feel pride and responsibility for the supportive housing community, they become partners in the creation of a comfortable and safe environment. Efforts to foster community can be wide ranging and usually begin with activities that give tenants and staff opportunities to get to know one another, but they can also evolve into efforts that promote connections to the surrounding neighborhood and broader environment. This tool discusses various strategies for guiding community-building efforts.

Strategies for Effective Community Building

Fostering Relationships:

Fostering relationships with and among tenants enhances the overall stability of a supportive housing project. This can occur through informal conversations, one-on-one outreach efforts, workshops, group activities, and special events. Monitoring outreach efforts and patterns of attendance at group functions is important for tracking tenant involvement as well as the popularity and target audiences of group events.

Activities that allow for casual interaction such as coffee hours and entertainment are effective for bringing people together. Similarly, staff can invite guest speakers and organize groups and workshops that focus on topics of common interest such as career advancement, financial planning, men's/women's issues, health, and current events. For new tenants and staff, a welcome committee may be organized. Many supportive housing projects have handbooks and/or orientation packets that include information about the housing project, the service program, important policies and procedures, neighborhood resources and telephone numbers.

Involving Tenants:

Tenant involvement and input are investments in the supportive housing community. When project sponsors seek and respond to tenant input, tenants are given ownership in the community. Forums that allow tenants and staff to discuss each other's ideas help to promote mutual understanding and maximize cooperation. Community meetings and tenant advisory groups and councils are useful perceived usefulness, quality and relevance of the services being offered mechanisms for

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 CSH's publication *Developing the "Support" in Supportive Housing*, which is available at www.csh.org/publications.

involvement. Programs can also use tenant surveys to gather opinions about the community and incorporate this information into ongoing planning efforts.

Getting Tenant Input:

Similarly, getting input through surveys and conversations can help to ensure that activities and special events will be appealing to a cross section of interests. Involving tenants in decision-making is an effective way to develop trust and encourage shared responsibility, although engaging their input must also translate into a willingness to hear criticism, to share some authority for decision-making, and to be open to change. Sharing power can be challenging, particularly when the input is critical of the supportive housing project, such as disagreements over house rules or complaints about staff. However, failing to respond to tenants' ideas and concerns can be a source of mistrust and can damage relationships.

Prior to seeking tenant input, project sponsors should be clear about which decisions they are willing to negotiate and those that are not negotiable due to program philosophy, resources, or restrictions from funding sources. To avoid raising false expectations, it is important that the boundaries are clear and basic questions are answered.

- How are tenants' ideas to be incorporated into the decision-making process?
- Who makes the final decisions?
- What is the process for evaluating and revisiting decisions in the future?

Another vehicle for involving tenants is to hire them as staff. Having tenants on staff helps to prevent "we/them" divisions, and seeing fellow tenants working is a visible reminder that everyone is an integral and valued part of the operation. Similarly, involving tenants in interviews of prospective staff can add valuable perspectives.

Community Meetings:

Regularly scheduled "community meetings" that are open to all staff and tenants are a feature of many supportive housing projects. Occurring on a regularly scheduled basis, the meetings serve as a forum to make announcements and to express viewpoints and suggestions. Community meetings help to trouble-shoot issues, dispel rumors, sing praises, and share information. With an outlet to express concerns, staff and tenants can identify and solve problems and work toward common goals.

Involving Staff:

Collaborative efforts between tenants and staff are usually required to make community building efforts successful, although the experience of working as a group toward common goals may be new. In fact, everyone may be more accustomed to the staff "doing for" tenants (e.g., making building repairs or making a referral for health services), and it may feel different to "do things with" tenants (e.g., attending a conference or rally). Sometimes, it can be difficult for staff members to switch roles from service provider or property manager to "partner." In more effective community-building efforts, staff members are able to move beyond the concept of "client" as the primary frame of reference for tenants. Similarly, tenants may have to shift how they relate to staff.

Since direct service staff members are likely to have had more training or experience in the delivery of counseling and supportive services than in community organizing, they are sometimes less interested in community-building tasks than other areas of work. Consequently, community-

building efforts can land on the back burner. In this regard, programs should consider the interests, experience, and training needs among staff when hiring or assigning responsibilities for community-building efforts. Staff members who have experience in group work often have skills that are transferable. In-service training sessions that emphasize community-organizing techniques, negotiation, conflict resolution, and the facilitation of task-oriented groups are useful. While some staff members may be specifically assigned to work on community-building activities, all staff should have a role in creating the supportive housing community and, preferably, are able to integrate these efforts into day-to-day work.

To be successful, staff members that have responsibility for community-building efforts should have:

- Clear goals and objectives;
- Commitment of resources from project sponsors;
- Time to invest;
- Commitment to the issues;
- Enthusiasm about the work;
- Willingness to share authority with tenants;
- Ability to hear and respond to criticism;
- Ability to work well with management, other staff members, tenants, and neighborhood and community groups, if applicable.

Guiding Group Norms:

“Norms” or informal rules for behavior have a substantial impact on the housing environment. Although leases and occupancy agreements establish the formal requirements of tenancy, the culture within supportive housing projects is very much determined by the everyday behaviors and traditions of tenants and staff. Norms can be effective to control noise and littering, maintain cleanliness, and guide the use of shared facilities such as kitchens, hallways, elevators, recreation rooms, and bathrooms. A building that is kept clean and in good repair by management, for instance, encourages tenants and staff to have pride and respect for the building as well.

Some norms may also contribute to negative patterns within the community, such as an unspoken understanding that it is better to give in to the demands of a particularly bossy tenant than to risk confrontation. It is useful to identify behaviors that conflict with the expectations of the supportive housing community and to determine how they will be addressed. In instances where individuals exhibit undesirable behaviors, it is sometimes necessary for tenants and staff to join together to reinforce positive norms and challenge negative behaviors. Tenant and community meetings are sometimes used as forums to address these issues.

Discouraging Negative Patterns of Behavior:

Allowing negative behaviors to go unchecked can be harmful and lower the morale of the housing community. For example, not addressing sexist, racist, or homophobic remarks could result in an environment in which some members feel vulnerable, unsafe, and disrespected. Engaging discussions at community meetings or other forums about how people feel about such comments can help reinforce group confidence, positive attitudes, and mutual respect. Working together, staff and tenants can brainstorm possible solutions.

Developing Tenant Leadership:

Although the staff usually initiates community-building activities, transferring leadership responsibilities from the staff to tenants is sometimes a logical and natural progression of these efforts. Particularly when regarding self-help groups and tenant associations, it is clear that tenants, not staff, should take the lead. Working with individuals to become fully empowered as a group or organization is an exciting prospect and, in some cases, the ultimate goal of community-organizing efforts. To the extent that developing more autonomous group structures is within the staff's scope of work, the quality of the effort that takes place in the early phases of the process is an important predictor of ongoing stability and success. Engaging tenants and effectively involving them in decision-making are critical steps in the development of independence and self-reliance.

Creating autonomous group structures requires complex tasks and responsibilities, however, and there are many variables to consider. For example, a successful transition from staff to tenant leadership requires an accurate assessment of tenant leaders' skills and commitment to the group. Similarly, group dynamics and the respective forces at play can make the choice of tenant leaders very complicated. While establishing group autonomy is a desirable goal, the premature withdrawal of staff leaders can leave a major void if tenant leadership has not sufficiently developed. A common error among inexperienced staff members is to make premature judgments and move too quickly to establish formal tenant leadership without providing the necessary level of support and training. Much of the literature regarding group development and community organizing point out the problems of creating "democratic" structures without the required organizational sanctions and group stability. Misjudging important group development processes can cause unwanted conflicts among the staff and tenants.

Tips for Guiding Community-Building Efforts:

- Progress from simple to complex activities. Confidence, skills, and ability grow with experience.
- Establish reasonable priorities. Successful outcomes are empowering and enhance future prospects for success.
- Focus on both process and outcome. Community-building efforts are most effective when there are concrete goals and an appreciation for group process, such as building relationships, identifying leadership, and being inclusive.

Connecting to the Neighborhood and Broader Environment:

From any angle, connecting with neighborhood residents and working together on local community issues create win-win scenarios. Getting involved in improving the local quality of life helps neighbors see the supportive housing project as an asset, and being a good neighbor helps connect tenants and staff to the neighborhood. There are many ways that staff and tenants can become involved in the community, and supportive housing projects sometimes adapt and expand their staffing and resources to work in the neighborhood and broader community. The following are examples of these efforts:

- Getting involved in local block associations, crime watch groups, and civic associations
- Participating in neighborhood cleanup and block parties
- Supporting community gardens by donating materials and volunteering time
- Providing homework help and tutoring for neighborhood children and youth
- Providing information to local residents

- Circulating a petition or advocating with local officials for specific improvements, such as increased police protection in the neighborhood
- Joining community advisory boards
- Working with advocacy groups and coalitions for social change
- Volunteering at neighborhood senior centers, nursing homes, and soup kitchens
- Making meeting space available to neighborhood groups

Sponsoring Community Activities:

- *Art Galleries:* By using community rooms and other open spaces, some supportive housing projects create art galleries for local artists. Similar to most art galleries, sponsors host “openings” and post announcements for new shows. Some organizations have secured private funding to hire consulting curators and to cover additional costs and expenses. Galleries can gather a wide interest and following from the neighborhood and artist community.
- *Meeting Space:* One way to promote a good-neighbor policy is to allow neighborhood residents and organizations to use space within the supportive housing project. By hosting the meetings of block associations and other community groups, housing sponsors fill a neighborhood need while encouraging tenants and staff to participate as well. Providing organizations such as Alcoholics Anonymous (AA), Narcotics Anonymous (NA), or the National Alliance for the Mentally Ill (NAMI) with public meeting space can also be of mutual benefit to tenants and the community at large.
- *Events Board:* Service providers typically have linkages to networks of provider organizations, self-help groups, coalitions, and advocacy groups that are of interest to tenants and staff. A designated area for posting flyers and notices announcing activities that are being sponsored by outside organizations is a basic communication tool.
- *Neighborhood Issues:* In some supportive housing projects, staff and tenants identify issues and concerns that are of importance to them—such as homelessness, crime, AIDS, or mental illness and work together in the interest of promoting change (e.g., attending rallies, participating in letter writing campaigns, and meeting with elected officials).