



Key Principles of Supportive Housing

In practice, supportive housing programs are diverse and are intended to have the flexibility to serve a wide range of individuals. Variations in program philosophy, size, location, tenant mix, staffing and support are among a myriad of elements that make each housing site different from the next. A site's tenancy, for instance, might include working people, the unemployed and underemployed, people living with AIDS, individuals with physical and/or mental illnesses, the formerly homeless, substance abusers in recovery or still using, and others. Coupled with affordability, the flexibility to adapt services to the needs of the building's tenants is one of the model's greatest strengths. Although there are many differences among supportive housing programs, numerous principles have informed and guided the model's development. This document reviews core principles that providers need to consider in order to address the housing stability and health and human service needs of their tenants.

Affordability

A primary purpose of supportive housing is to increase the availability of housing to low-income people:

- Tenants may be expected to pay rent, but typically not in an amount that exceeds thirty per cent of gross income.
- Providers operate fiscally viable housing sites often by relying upon rent subsidy programs, such as Section 8, Shelter Plus Care, or other subsidy programs.
- Some projects also rely on the rental streams provided by units reserved for individuals who are employed, and some projects have relied upon the use of low-income housing tax credits to help with development costs.

Safety and Comfort

Tenants should feel comfortable and safe in their homes. The needs of some tenants will often require that the provider pay particular attention to safety issues. People who have been homeless have frequently been victims of or exposed to violence, and some tenants can become prey and the targets of intimidation and exploitation.

- Meeting or exceeding building codes and providing added security and amenities, when resources allow, are efforts that all tenants appreciate.
- A secure environment includes the development and implementation of clear administrative procedures for rent collection, building maintenance, monitoring visitors, enforcement of house rules, and opportunities for tenants to provide input on the safety and comfort of their living environment.

Note: This document is included within the *Understanding Permanent Supportive Housing* section of CSH's *Toolkit for Developing and Operating Supportive Housing*, which is available at www.csh.org/toolkit2.

- Promptly addressing safety concerns that are expressed by the tenants is important. Staff and tenants must feel that they have some collective control over their environment. In residences where people feel part of a larger community, they are also more likely to look out for their neighbors and work together to create a safe and comfortable environment.

Support Services are Accessible, Flexible, and Target Residential Stability

Ideally, supportive services are reflective of the tenants' needs and goals. Service programs also require adjustment as the needs and interests of the individual tenants and the larger supportive housing project community evolve and change. By design, supportive housing support services are intended to help ensure stability and to maximize each tenant's ability to live independently. Support services must be easily accessible and available to tenants, and evaluation of services for effectiveness and usefulness should occur on a regular basis.

- Programs that have a concentration of individuals with disabilities or other special needs will likely emphasize ongoing assistance with medication and money management, training and assistance with activities of daily living, support in achieving and maintaining sobriety, and accessing health and mental health services.
- Sites vary in how they provide or arrange for services but uniformly stress residential stability as a basic and primary goal of their efforts. In promoting supportive housing project stability, services providers focus on assisting tenants to meet their lease obligations, including paying rent, maintaining a safe and healthy living environment, allowing others the peaceful enjoyment of their homes, and complying with basic house rules.
- Depending upon the tenant population and the types of resources available, services can be shaped to have the widest possible appeal and may range from support groups for substance abusers to classes in cooking, the arts, high school equivalency preparation and vocational counseling.
- Linkages with legal services, immigration services and local entitlement and benefits offices are usually essential. Although tenants sometimes need to be actively encouraged to use program resources, the onus is on the provider to make the program useful, available and of interest to tenants.
- Supportive housing programs vary in their ability to modify or significantly change their programs because funding, regulatory or other structural requirements may impose restrictions or limitations. In this regard, providers need to carefully weigh the long-term impact that funding or other regulatory agreements could have on a project.

Empowerment and Independence

Supportive housing is intended for people who, at a minimum, can live independently with appropriate assistance. The role of the supportive housing staff is to provide the assistance and, whenever possible, help the tenant increase his or her level of independence. It is expected that some people will eventually be able to live independently without ongoing support, others will need help from time to time, and still others will require help in perpetuity. In general, however, most tenants will benefit from services that are intended to further their independence. Examples of

program efforts specifically intended to foster independence and empower tenants include the following:

- Promoting a tenancy that is heterogeneous and integrates individuals with disabilities or other special needs
- Providing tenants with property leases
- Allowing overnight guests
- Encouraging tenant councils and advisory groups
- Involving tenants in making and modifying house rules
- Involving tenants directly in the management structure of a project or building
- Providing employment opportunities and vocational services
- Appointing tenant representatives to the organization's Board of Directors

Tenants should be able to make lifestyle choices, for instance, even though they may conflict with the provider's preferences. Alcohol, sex and gambling, for example, are issues that can be inherently challenging. Similarly, some tenants will prefer to have limited (if any) interaction with the supportive services staff or with other tenants. Developing meaningful structures that empower tenants will help to ensure the long-term success of a project.