



Mediating Conflicts in Supportive Housing

Mediating Conflicts

Staff intervention in conflicts can often reduce the possibility of escalation and avert crises. Mediating conflicts can also help to mend relationships, reinforce norms and rules, and support the cohesiveness of the community. On the other hand, staff interventions that are meddling or micromanaging can have negative outcomes because they are invasive and do not allow tenants to solve problems on their own. Conflicts among tenants are not uncommon, and staff will want to exercise judgment about becoming involved, particularly if the conflict is not affecting other tenants. Conflict mediation can also be complicated and time consuming.

Circumstances that may require staff intervention are when a tenant is at odds with the program or staff or is interfering with the well-being of other tenants. Examples of these conflicts are:

- Breaking house rules
- Threatening the safety of others
- Antagonistic behaviors
- Criminal behavior

When the staff does become involved, talking with all parties separately, even though there is no clear resolution, can help to relieve tensions. Some programs take conflict mediation to a higher level by sponsoring tenant mediation programs or involving an outside mediator. The role and responsibilities of the staff person/facilitator should be made clear and be accepted by the participants. Mediation requires skill - the mediator must remain balanced, be perceived as neutral, and must avoid viewing a conflict as having right and wrong dimensions or that good and bad people are involved.

Seven Steps to Resolving Conflict

The goal of conflict mediation is to facilitate a discussion and understanding of the reasons for a conflict and arrive at a mutually acceptable plan for resolution. A facilitator works with the parties who are involved, meeting independently and as a group. Ideally, the parties involved agree to a process. The role of the facilitator is to guide those involved in a conflict toward an agreement, if possible. This section reviews seven basic steps to mediating a conflict. Completing all seven steps will usually require more than one meeting, and getting stuck at a particular point may indicate a need to go back to an earlier step in the process.

Step 1. Introduce the resolution process and set the tone and guidelines for the process.

At the beginning of a conflict resolution process, the facilitator should review the purpose and guidelines for meeting. Some effective guidelines to use during the resolution process include:

Note: This document is included within the *Housing Operations* 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 CSH's publication *Developing the "Support" in Supportive Housing*, which is available at www.csh.org/publications.

- One person speaking at a time
- Talk from one's own experiences and feelings (e.g., use "I" statements)
- Agree to participate in a non-hostile manner
- Use positive communication
- Manage anger

Step 2. Ask clarifying questions, elicit information, and listen.

This process begins a discussion about perceptions. The facilitator helps tenants explore the conflict in further detail and focus on hearing the opposing view. An agreement to hear one another must be established here. The facilitator, at this time, tries to help the tenants ask each other clarifying questions and help them listen to one another.

Step 3. Focus on the interests behind the conflict.

This step is intended to clarify further the different perspectives about the causes of the conflict. Each individual explores perceptions and feelings and defines needs and interests. Values and beliefs are often introduced, allowing each participant to explain views and perspectives about the conflict. The facilitator and participants work to identify and isolate the causes of the problem.

Step 4. Arrive at a mutually agreed upon definition of the problem.

Achieving agreement among all participants about the definition of the problem is the first formal step to resolving a conflict. The facilitator should sum up each participant's definition of the problem and confirm agreement with all parties. If an agreement cannot be reached, then previous steps need to be revisited.

Step 5. Brainstorm solutions.

Once there is agreement about the problem definition, the tenants and facilitator explore possible solutions, and the participants and the facilitator propose different possibilities.

Step 6. Evaluate options.

The facilitator helps participants discuss the pros and cons of each solution that has been identified.

Step 7. Create an agreement.

Participants agree on one or more of the solutions and establish time frames for implementation and review. It is essential that participants commit to working toward solutions for a period of time that is long enough to determine its effectiveness. Depending upon the circumstances, the agreement may be written down.