



## Tenant Participation in Supportive Housing Settings

### How can Tenants Participate in Supportive Housing Projects?

Many supportive housing owners seek ways to build community and tenant involvement within their projects because paid services alone seldom meet the tenants' need for support and because the owners are committed to the personal development of the residents. This section provides a quick sampling of tenant participation approaches.

#### Before the Building Opens

Even before the building opens, future residents and consumer representatives can be a valuable resource. Owners have drawn upon these representatives for advice on a range of issues, such as site selection issues, design decisions and trade-offs, and supportive service needs and priorities. Methods for obtaining consumer input at this stage have included facilitated focus groups such as those used in private market research, client surveys, and formal advisory groups.

Potential residents can also assist in building community support for a project by participating in community outreach and providing testimony at public hearings in support of a project.

#### After the Building Opens

While tenants can be very involved as individuals, the most common tool for resident involvement is a tenant association or tenant council. A typical mission statement of a tenant association is "to improve the quality of life for building residents by involving and empowering them to participate in management, social, recreational and political issues which affect the tenants of the building."

As a group or individually, tenants typically play four types of roles in building operations: an advisory role, a role in implementing programs, a role as a property management employee, or a role on the governing board of directors.

*Advisory Role:* Tenant councils have played an advisory role on the following types of issues:

*Tenant screening:* Some believe that there's no better way to convey to applicants the character and quality of a building than to involve tenants in the screening process. To comply with fair housing laws prohibiting discrimination, tenants typically decide on a few questions they want to ask all building applicants, and propose these questions to management and management lawyers for

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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](http://www.csh.org/toolkit2). This document has been adapted from CSH's publication *Not a Solo Act*, which is available at [www.csh.org/publications](http://www.csh.org/publications).

approval or amendments. Once approved, tenant representatives should ask these questions of all new applicants. As Wanda Remmers of the California Coalition for Special Needs Housing states, “Sometimes tenants can help prospective tenants feel more at ease during the interview process and can help identify the ‘red flag’ issues to follow up on.”

*Staff selection:* Residents can participate in a similar way in the selection of key management or service staff members.

*House rules:* Because house rules are typically part of the rental agreement, any changes must be approved and initialed by each resident. Accordingly, some tenants’ associations find it is most practical to review house rules once a year, at most, so as to develop consensus around which recommendations should be made to management. Issues regarding security, guests, noise, alcohol and use of community space are often of interest.

*Service program or spending priorities:* Residents can have input on such priorities as on-site classes or special presentations, new services, maintenance investments, and other activities.

*Periodic meetings:* Regular association meetings with service or management staff can increase communication and allow problems to be attended to quickly.

*Evaluation:* Tenant councils and individual tenants can complete tenant satisfaction surveys concerning both management and service practices to identify strengths and areas for improvement.

*Implementing Programs:* Tenant associations often organize holiday parties, potluck dinners, and other social activities such as Halloween haunted houses, summer barbecues and field trips. Some tenant associations organize a “welcome committee” to meet and greet new tenants. Tenants may participate in building or community clean-up days, neighborhood efforts to address gang activity, or other area voluntary activity. Associations have designed and implemented programs from food cooperatives to movie nights, drama clubs to support groups, yoga classes to open studio time. Sports teams and walking or exercise clubs are also popular activities. Some tenant associations become involved in community political activities such as voter registration, education, and public testimony on neighborhood issues.

*Tenant Employment:* Tenant employees can be a powerful force, particularly in buildings with a 24-hour front desk staff. In New York City, the Committee for the Heights Inwood Homeless (CHIH) hires only tenants to staff the front desks at its five single room occupancy hotel sites. Over fifty tenants work on a part-time basis, which allows these individuals to move away from dependence on entitlements, maintain eligibility for Medicaid, and juggle educational and rehabilitation pursuits. Because nearly one-quarter of the tenancy works in management, they help to shape a constructive culture in these buildings. Their insights and sophistication concerning common tenant issues is augmented by training in conflict resolution and emergency procedures by CHIH and the services staff. As a CHIH staff member observes, “Widespread participation by tenants in the managerial structure of the building enhances staff and tenant relations and serves to equalize common interests. Over time, mutual confidence is engendered.”

*Tenant Board Participation:* One or more tenants can serve on the governing board for the project, or on the committee of the board that supervises operations. A tenant representative can be a volunteer or can be elected by the tenant council or tenant body as a formal representative. To

avoid tokenism, this strategy requires a parallel commitment to provide the resident representatives with the information and skills needed to play a full role on the board.

### **Issues to Keep in Mind**

Tenant involvement will only be successful for the residents and for the project if it meets a few basic criteria:

- Participation must meet real needs and create real results. Tenants will not participate in a tenant council to make the owner's team members feel good about themselves. Tenants will only be willing to commit their time if an activity is rewarding, effective, fun, or all three.
- Don't ask for resident input if you aren't willing to take it seriously and devote time to addressing resident concerns.
- To be true "partners" in the building's success, residents need to understand the financial and other constraints of the project, and they need to participate in setting the building's goals.
- Try to ensure that some resources are available to meet resident requests or implement resident ideas, some developments set aside a source of income such as laundry or vending machine revenues for control by the tenant association for resident activities. Others ask residents to program and set priorities for community space or provide resources for a periodic newsletter. Control of a tangible resource increases resident interest. A convenient on-site meeting space increases participation enormously.
- Democratic leadership skills are not widely taught in our culture. Try to make organizing and training resources available to residents to give them the skills to conduct good meetings and create an accountable organization.