



Addressing Common Community Concerns

Avoid polarizing behavior.

Most opposition to supportive housing stems from fear and is best addressed through a calm and reassuring approach. Don't use rhetoric and finger wagging to make your point. Avoid the use of the term "NIMBY." It immediately pegs anyone who expresses concerns about your program an adversary. Treating initial skeptics as 'NIMBY-type enemies' may become a self-fulfilling prophecy. Always remain polite, cordial and respectful. Do not hide information. Do not fight back and get defensive or emotional.

Remember that, to some degree, although providing education may be effective for decision-makers and the media, with many people, factual information may have no effect since their fears are based on emotions rather than intellect. For this reason, it is important to speak calmly and with reassurance. Repetition is also important as people in the grips of fear and anger won't hear things the first time they are said.

***Example:** On the day that the purchase of a project building was to be finalized, a neighbor came up the driveway and wanted to know who would be living in the house. Upon being told of the nature of the program, the neighbor became upset and later sent out letters to the press and surrounding neighbors voicing her concern about increases in crime and lowered property values. After the sale, the group tried to be as responsive as possible to her, providing her with contact information should she want to talk to someone directly. When she complained about a bag of trash being left at the end of the driveway, the bag was removed immediately. (It had turned out that a volunteer group which had come to the house to rake and bag grass, had failed to bring the bag to the dump, as instructed.) A decision was made to call the neighbor every week, to check in with her. As time went by, and she became more comfortable with the staff, the conversations grew more neutral and her concerns waned. Last year, the organization received a holiday card from her.*

Humanize the object of fear.

Because it is human nature to fear the unknown, help worried neighbors "put a face" on the object of their fear. Get to know future residents so you can speak with conviction on why the project is so important. Ideally, it would be best if people could meet face to face, replacing abstract concerns with a human face and a compelling story. One way to jumpstart introductions is to have a compelling speaker tell his or her story as part of the agenda of a community forum or a small meeting with neighbors.

Is it inappropriate to ask residents to participate in this kind of role? In most cases, residents report that they have no problem with speaking in this capacity. So often neighbors resist a project not because the fear it will affect their property values but because they are afraid that the residents will do something unsafe and unpredictable. By speaking directly to their prospective neighbors, residents are able to allay fears. One resident describes the situation by saying that his entire life he felt he was being closely scrutinized. He felt that because he has always felt as if he and others like him were living under a microscope anyway, it felt great to provide a human face as a way to help others.

Just listen.

In many cases, what you say is less important than the fact that you take these concerns seriously and want to make sure the development is an asset to the community. Be sure to keep elected officials and staff-- especially supportive and potential “swing” supporters-- informed about how you are attempting to meet the concerns of neighbors.

By developing a relationship with the community, they will begin to know you – and in time trust you. Try to keep your group visible. Follow up often and try to avoid long gaps between contacts. Invite people to your office and check in frequently to see how people are feeling. On the other hand, don't expect to dispel years of accumulated fear even by a combination of these strategies. You probably don't need to. The goal should be to respond to legitimate concerns, focus on the issues properly before decision-makers, and let fears and prejudices reveal themselves as just that.

Be realistic.

Don't expect to convert all opponents into supporters. Recognize that participating in the opposition may be the most exciting experience of community purpose and unity that a neighbor has ever felt. Other neighbors who do come to support the project can be very helpful to you.

In the end, a developer does not need to win over every opponent, only those whose position or ability to sway others has the potential for defeating the proposed housing development. Developers will do best by confirming the support of strong allies, attempting to win over influential players in the middle and limiting the damage from committed opponents.

Here are some approaches for dealing with some of the most common neighborhood fears:

- ***“Supportive housing will bring in people who behave destructively or dangerously.”***

Neighbors may be concerned that your program will tolerate destructive behavior by formerly homeless tenants. Opponents may be able to cite examples of other housing communities that negatively affected their neighbors. In fact, we all could probably identify affordable housing developments that were poorly managed. We also know that supportive housing tenants occasionally will have difficulties that neighbors may perceive as threatening, such as a mental illness relapse.

Many neighbors may feel more comfortable if they know about the supportive service component of your program. Let them know that individuals who experience difficulties will have immediate access to staff who can intervene in crisis, and that neighbors will have someone to go to when they become concerned about the condition of the property or the behavior of tenants. You should also accentuate the community-building aspect of supportive housing and its emphasis on peer accountability and support.

- ***“Supportive Housing will lessen our property values.”***

Interestingly, it can sometimes be easier to develop housing in wealthier towns because these communities often feel confident that several units of housing will have little impact on their overall property values. In inner-ring suburbs, on the other hand, many residents feel more threatened by an “encroachment” of the city ills they hoped to leave behind. The

fact of the matter is that dozens of studies exist that have found that affordable/supportive housing does not lower property values. In fact, many studies have found the converse: that especially in poorer communities, well-designed, well-managed properties actually raise property values.

Nevertheless, statistics cannot predict any individual behavior. In other words, a particular fearful buyer may not be aware of or moved by facts about non-impact on property values or livability, and she/he might withdraw an offer. This single event does not mean that the market value of the nearby properties has decreased, only that this particular buyer decided not to buy the property. Only a pattern of such behavior would indicate a possible decrease.

You can provide people with several studies:

- [2-Page summary of a variety of studies on property values](#)
In general, over a period of several decades, dozens of studies conducted by independent researchers and employing a wide variety of methods have found that contemporary affordable housing has no negative impact on surrounding property values, rate of turnover, or other measures. A few studies have shown increases in property values and a few have shown possible or small negative impacts.
- [Results of Studies conducted by Arthur Andersen on 9 Supportive Housing developments in CT.](#)

You may also want to have an informed realtor and/or appraiser familiar with doing property value studies speak to the group. People are often more swayed when they hear information from “trusted authorities.”

But studies and articulate speakers may not have an effect on people’s fears, because often these fears are emotional and not intellectual. Sometimes, the best approach is just to listen.

- **“Supportive housing will quickly become an eyesore.”**
Often these concerns are based on perceptions of older public and subsidized housing complexes. Many of these projects were built with inferior design and materials, did not include enough funds for ongoing maintenance, and have been poorly managed, turning them into deteriorated neighborhood eyesores. It is right for citizens to be concerned about this, and you must be prepared to address their concerns. You can learn from the mistakes of these older housing complexes.

Talk to your local public housing agency or HUD office to find out what was missing in older projects to ensure their ongoing maintenance.

Take some time and walk around these projects. Note what is missing that you will want to include, such as good building materials, attractive design or sufficient green space. Take an architect or contractor with you to help you analyze what your development should do differently.

Finally, find ways to show neighbors that your housing will be of the same quality (or better) as the surrounding neighborhood. At any meetings about your development, show preliminary drawings illustrating the presentation of the housing from the street. Share information on the quality of the construction materials. Bring samples. Make sure the architect is available to answer questions. Encourage neighbors to critique the design and make suggestions for changes.

You might consider sharing your property management budget and management plan, emphasizing that the property management will be based on the best practices or best models and incorporate lessons learned from other similar facilities.

- ***“Supportive housing tenants will bring crime and drugs into our area.”***
Many neighborhoods either are currently fighting drug activity or are fearful that the drug epidemic striking other communities will follow tenants with histories of alcohol or drug abuse. If neighbors raise this concern, use it as an opportunity to showcase the services that will be in place for residents seeking assistance with attaining sobriety. In one community, the police chief was asked to write a letter verifying that there had been no crime associated with a developer’s previous projects. His letter was read out loud during the meeting.

Although there are not many published reports, one [study](#) has shown that rather than contributing to neighborhood crime, supportive housing programs have overwhelmingly had a positive effect on surrounding neighborhoods.

- ***“The children residing in supportive housing have such extensive needs that our schools and community services will become overwhelmed.”***
This is another reaction based on fear that you may be able to counter with information. In fact, many schools are currently stretched to capacity with overcrowded classrooms and overwhelmed special services, but that does not mean that your supportive housing development will worsen the situation. If children in your supportive housing development will be coming from the area and are already attending local schools, be sure to let opponents know that there will not be an increase in demand for services.

Another important point to make is that cost per student is not an accurate measurement of the real cost of another student given the fact that much of that dollar amount covers the overall building costs that do not actually increase by the presence of an additional child.

Perhaps the most important point to emphasize is that overcrowding in schools is a national problem and is not unique to a particular project. As citizens we should be demanding increased commitment to educating our youth – all our youth -- regardless of where they live. A better educated citizenry makes for a better community on many levels.

- ***“Supportive housing will increase traffic and place greater demand on emergency services.”***
It is legitimate for a community to be concerned about increases in demand on its infrastructure. If the project will increase traffic, and this traffic may threaten children’s safety, this should be your concern as well. Many problems with traffic can be resolved through selecting a good site for your housing. Your architect can help you conduct a study of the density (number of housing units within a certain amount of space) of your

development to determine how it will affect local traffic patterns. Often, the neighbors' concern is not the amount of traffic that the housing will attract, but the type. They assume that the tenants will attract drug activity, requiring repeated police intervention. Again, collect data on the number of police calls to similar supportive housing sites, and use this as an opportunity to share your program's crime prevention aspects.

- ***“Supportive housing will bring people into our community who do not have the same values we hold.”***

This attitude is based on a stereotype of homeless families as welfare dependent, lazy and irresponsible. There are several arguments that can counter this stereotype. First, with few exceptions, most states have very strict welfare-to-work laws, requiring anyone who receives public assistance to be engaged in work readiness activities or be fully employed.

Second, an increasing number of homeless families have at least one working parent already. Finally, most of those with a past history of receiving welfare benefits do want to become employed, but they may need help reaching that goal — help that supportive housing can provide. Discuss your program's education and employment activities with neighborhood opponents. Also, share some of the stories about homelessness you learned during your information-gathering stage if those stories underscore the families' desires for the same things the neighbors want: safety, pride in their neighborhood, good schools, health, and respect in the community and workplace. You may be able to identify homeless families who would be willing to talk to neighbors about these commonly shared values. Nothing can transform opponents' views like seeing the very people they fear step forward and share their dreams of living in a community that will accept them.

- ***“Supportive housing gives families something they haven't earned.”***

A growing number of people believe that providing services promotes dependence. The argument often is articulated as, “I pulled myself up by my bootstraps and these families should too.”

In reality, nearly all of us can point to someone who helped us at a key time in our lives. Few of us succeed solely on our own merits. Usually, this argument masks an underlying concern about the opponents' own economic security. Find out by getting to know the supportive housing opponents. Most home owners have their primary financial security tied up in the equity in their homes, and they worry that something could threaten that security. If this is their concern, as noted earlier, you can reassure them that supportive housing will not have a negative impact on their homes' value. Also, make sure that opponents know how supportive housing promotes families' independence through measures such as prompt rent collections, tenant skills training programs and employment training programs.

Example: Mutual Housing Association of Southwestern Connecticut developed a project in Guilford that involved the purchase of 9 acres for 13 units in a very residential part of town. The project required a variance due to the minimum acreage requirements. At the first zoning board meeting, there were about 30 people and 30 signs. In an effort to address the opposition, MHA went door-to-door through the neighborhood distributing information about the project and the organization. People were worried that the development would be like a public housing project, with residents who did not work, as well as increase in crime rate and decrease in property values. MHA tried to address

these concerns at the zoning meeting, but it seemed as if their words were falling on deaf ears.

Ultimately, as a way of addressing community fears about their neighbors, MHA met with the leader of the opposition and asked him if he would be willing to serve on the tenant selection committee. At first he was very reluctant and said he would only come to observe, but he later agreed to serve on the committee, went through the Fair Housing training required of all selection committee members and took an active part screening applicants. Months later, after the selection process was completed, he shared that the experience had really opened his eye to what people had to go through who could not afford housing. He also said that he really enjoyed getting a chance to meet and know his future neighbors. He characterized the experience as one that had changed his life.

Source: *Dealing with Fearful Opponents of Housing and Service Developments, and How to Deal with Property Values Concerns*, Non-Profit Housing Association of Northern California