



Case Study: Supportive Housing Associates

This case study is illustrative of some of the pitfalls of developing supportive housing in a small town without doing the necessary community support spadework in advance. Nonotuck, a former textile mill town whose last major mill closed in 1985, has a population of 15,283.

Supportive Housing Associates

Davenport House (formerly known as the Standish Arms and Fairbanks, Nonotuck, CT)

In May 2004 the Connecticut Housing Finance Agency (CHFA) turned over the Standish Arms and Fairbanks Hotels in Nonotuck, CT to the management of Supportive Housing Associates (SHA), a New York-based leader in developing and operating supportive housing. The buildings had become notorious heroin drop off points between Boston and NY and were the focus of a series of stories in the Hartford Courant as well as in the national media. Supportive Housing Associates had gained national attention for its large-scale efforts in turning around troubled former rooming houses in Boston (most notably the 652-unit Beacon Hotel, one of the largest supportive housing SRO's in the nation) and was considered by CHFA to be one of the few organizations that could implement a successful supportive housing program in this challenging setting. The plan was that SHA would rehab the two Main Street properties into a mix of first floor retail, with an estimated 100 units of housing for people with special needs, the homeless and low-income working poor.

Eager to begin work on the buildings, Supportive Housing Associates had every reason to think the project would go smoothly. A court-appointed property manager had recently evicted all the known drug dealers and many of the drug-addicted tenants had been placed in drug rehabilitation programs. Presumably, the remaining residents would be excellent candidates for supportive housing. It also appeared SHA could count on a warm welcome from the town as assured by a Nonotuck selectman who had toured SHA's Boston properties.

It was not until the June 4, 2004 press conference that these illusions were quickly shattered. When SHA staff entered the room, they were surprised to see signs reading "Supportive Housing Associates Go Home!" People were screaming profanities, telling the organization that they were not welcome and should leave immediately. Nonotuck politicians, they chanted, had betrayed the community and acted against the will of the people.

Taken aback by this reaction, SHA assigned Kate Darling to spend a month in Nonotuck to immerse herself in the community and determine what next steps to take. One of the first people she met with was Doug Riley, a longtime Nonotuck resident and marketing director for the Nonotuck Region Chamber of Commerce. Riley was angry that the community had not been consulted about the project, but impressed by Darling's willingness to address this oversight, he offered to serve as a community "door-opener."

For the next few months, Darling spent much of her time talking to people. She was always careful to state upfront that she was not a Nonotuck native, making it less likely that others would bring up that point as an accusation. She met with as many people as would talk to her.

She spoke with social service providers, business leaders, church groups and PTA groups, members of the Kiwanis and Lions Club. She talked on TV and radio shows. But her favorite way to talk to people was one-on-one, finding it most conducive to comfortable and honest exchanges. The most common complaint: "Nobody asked us what we wanted."

Shortly after the initial press conference, SHA scheduled a public forum to address the community's concerns. Although it was immediately apparent that an event of this type would simply provide opponents with a mechanism with which to broadcast their dissension, it was too late to withdraw the offer, and SHA decided to go forward with the event. It was clear, however, that the event would need to be tightly scripted and well thought out in advance.

Initially, the event was to be held in conjunction with the Mayor's office. Instead, SHA opted to host it independently and changed the venue to a church. Darling asked Riley to facilitate the event and he agreed. Together they strategized how to structure the evening so it would not turn into an out-of-control screaming match.

Not surprisingly, the event was packed. SHA's founder/director, Maryanne Donohue and Darling sat on the edge of the stage, dangling their legs off the end. They were dressed casually, having long disposed of the business suits which inadvertently distanced them from the townspeople.

Kate Darling started by thanking all the people who had helped her. She then introduced Murphy who urged the audience to speak up – but also to listen. Donohue's speech was brief and simple. "I'm sorry," she told said. "We just didn't know. We're here now to listen." She then began the question and answer portion of the evening which involved giving each table of ten people several questions to answer as a group. Each table also put into writing any questions for Supportive Housing Associates. These [51 questions](#) were answered by Donohue as well as published on Supportive Housing Associates' website. Kate Darling then ended the evening by giving out her phone number for any future questions. A similar event was held several weeks later in Spanish.

In conjunction with these forums, Supportive Housing Associates organized two free bus tours to take Nonotuck residents to New York City to tour the Supportive Housing Associate's projects there. A total of 100 people participated, meeting with tenants, property managers and administrators, asking questions. It was a long day for everyone, but the visit had a powerful effect. One of the women who had been one of the most vocal opponents of the project admitted she did a 180-degree turn after taking the tour. "I think it will totally revitalize this town," she said, adding she "snooped" and "got out of line" to ask tough questions, and got answers that satisfied her. "These people actually care," she said.

After the NY trips, Kate Darling and her staff continued talking to the community. She also developed close ties with the newspapers and consistently had supportive articles and editorial coverage for the project. (Members of the press had gone down to Boston on the bus tour.)

As the months progressed, people began to see improvements at the building. The roof was fixed. The building was painted. 24-hour security and services were put in place. The crime rate went down to virtually nothing. But in spite a growing willingness to have SHA provide supportive housing to the residents of the Hotel, many community members, as well as the Nonotuck Downtown Advisory Group held steadfast in not wanting it to be located to be on Main Street. CHFA is now looking for an alternative site.