



## Organizing Successful Affordable Housing Tours

Seeing is believing. Whether the tour is large or small, informal or carefully orchestrated, introducing people to supportive housing "up close and personal" can have a dramatic impact on the way people view it. People who are tolerant and open-minded often become passionate advocates after visiting a project. Those who are neutral can become allies, and opponents of supportive housing, after talking with and meeting real people in supportive housing can become less obstructionist if not actually accepting. Stereotypes are challenged, burning concerns are allayed, and minds are opened. The following are suggestions gleaned from organizers of recent housing tours on how to make the most of them.

**It takes organizing.** This is not a case of "If you hold it, they will come." Often, the hardest part of organizing a tour is motivating the target audience to attend, especially opponents of a proposed development. Substantial planning and effort may be required to produce a good turn-out.

Making the logistics as user-friendly as possible will help, e.g. the tour bus picking up participants at a convenient location, date, and time. Invitations should be as personalized as possible and have a clearly-devised "hook" to grab your intended audience. You can use popular speakers as tour guides to attract an audience. Nail down some key participants and then leverage these to get others to come. Peer pressure may help. If project opponents are the target audience, they should know that decision-makers will be informed about your offer and their response.

Make sure someone will be taking pictures and/or slides of the tour for future use.

Providing refreshments, even simple drinks and cookies, always makes for a welcoming spirit and happier participants. If at all possible, before you settle on details, someone on the team should do a "dry run" of the tour and the program to determine whether it's realistic. Test every critical decision you make by asking yourself: Will this help us meet our goal? In one example, organizers decided to not inform the media about its tour so that the participants could have frank, off-the-record conversations.

### **Making points in your program**

At the beginning of the tour, the tour leader could ask a few questions to elicit participants' concerns and fears about supportive housing. (For example, "What are the most common concerns about supportive housing that you have heard?") This accomplishes a few things: (1) it helps establish rapport between the facilitator and the group; (2) it gives you a feel for the interests, concerns, and sophistication of your audience; and (3) it sets up what points you need to make in subsequent presentations.

Have someone available at all times (e.g. on the bus between stops) who can answer questions that arise after seeing one development and before seeing another. Pass out

survey forms for participants to give their suggestions for improvement. Explain how you will use their feedback, e.g. Construction/Design department will review it.

The presentation at a building could include pictures of the site before rehabilitation or construction to make a point about how it improved the neighborhood. You may want to include a slideshow or a small discussion panel as part of the tour program. Invite current residents of existing developments, property managers and current neighbors to give their "testimony," as well as the project manager or a representative of the developer. However, go over their comments with them beforehand. A volunteer at a shelter unwittingly told visiting guests, "I like to help out here, but I wouldn't want to live next door."

Obviously, residents and on-site staff should always be informed about the tour and its purpose. Those who are expected to speak should be prepared to answer questions that are likely to be asked. If the resident has a conflict with the management about her apartment, resolve it before the presentation. If your target audience is opponents, you'll want to leave time in the program to elicit and respond to their concerns. Don't promise to answer everything there and then.

### **Handouts can help**

Providing printed materials can take the pressure off of your desire to communicate large amounts of complex information in a short time. They can also provide participants something to browse through during the inevitable "down" time in transit. You can include "project profiles" which give vital information about each development, "resident profiles" which educate participants about who needs supportive housing, and "issue profiles" which reinforce and further document the points you are making in your presentations, e.g. about property values and professional management.

### **Evaluation and follow-up**

During the last leg of the ride or at the end of the presentation, invite participants to evaluate the tour. This reinforces your interest in their concerns and could help you design more effective tours in the future.

To get the most of your efforts, don't stop after the tour bus is empty. Set up a meeting with the team to debrief and evaluate your efforts. Call interested or enthusiastic participants to recruit them for future work. Send follow-up letters to those who attended, thanking them, answering any unanswered questions, and directing their attention to the next step -- whatever it is. Using your original mailing list, send follow-up letters to those who did not attend, inform them of the tour's success and offer them another chance to find out about supportive housing.

Most of all don't let the persuasive power of successful supportive housing developments go to waste. Show them your work, and show it often.

Currently there are [several sites in Connecticut which can be toured](#). Please contact CSH to help set up a tour of a supportive housing project in your vicinity.

*(Adapted from [How to Organize Successful Affordable Housing Tours, Building Better Communities Network](#))*