

Handout 2-6

SHARED HOUSING: AN OPTION FOR PEOPLE WITH MENTAL ILLNESS

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for

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Substance Abuse Services (OMHSAS)

Introduction

Finding decent, affordable housing is a dilemma for millions of Americans. The challenge can be even greater for people with disabilities, who often have very low incomes, face discrimination, and may need accessible housing and/or supports in order to live independently in the community.

It is therefore imperative to identify and explore a range of housing options that can meet the needs of people with disabilities.

One such option is shared housing. Shared housing has many benefits for both the community and the homesharers:

- 1 - Sharing reduces the housing costs of individual householders, thereby increasing disposable income for other basic needs.
- 2 - It fosters self-determination and interdependence, reducing the need for formal supports and institutionalization.
- 3 - It can be part of a strategy for community stabilization by making more efficient use of the existing stock without requiring major design changes.
- 4 - It reduces isolation and provides opportunities for companionship and socialization for the homesharers.
- 5 - The model is flexible and adaptable to a variety of populations.

This Question and Answer Sheet will introduce the concept of shared housing and answer some basic questions about its characteristics and how it might be used by people with disabilities. It will also direct you to places you can go to find additional information on shared housing.

Shared Housing: Questions and Answers

Q: What is shared housing?

A: Shared housing is a living arrangement where two or more unrelated people share a home or apartment to their mutual advantage. Each person has a private room and shares common living areas.

Q: How many shared models are there?

A: Two. Match-up and group shared residences.

Q: What is match-up?

A: In a match-up a homeowner shares his/her home with a homeseeker who pays rent. Many matches are intergenerational and/or involve the provision of services in exchange for a reduction in rent.

Q: What is a group shared residence?

A: A group shared residence involves a number of people living cooperatively in a single large dwelling. Many residences are sponsored by non-profit organizations and may involve the provision of meals, laundry and housekeeping services.

Q: What distinguishes shared housing from other forms of congregate living?

A: Two characteristics distinguish shared housing:

1. Choice: members of shared housing choose the other members of the household and as such the members are often referred to as a “family of choice.”
2. Control: members of a shared residence make policy decision and manage the day-to-day operations of their home. They decide rules about pets, guests, smoking, etc. and often buy food, as well as cook and eat together.

Q: Is shared housing a good option for everyone?

A: No. Home sharing is most suitable for individuals who are flexible and willing to compromise; who are assertive enough to confront problems and communicate their needs to others; who are sensitive to the needs of others; and can accept other people’s personalities, moods and preferences.

Q: What can be done to ensure the compatibility of home sharers?

A: Three steps are suggested:

1. A *screening process* to insure that home sharers have complementary needs and lifestyles.
2. A mutually agreed upon *trial period* during which home sharers can get to know each other and decide if shared housing is a desirable option and if they are compatible with other home sharers.
3. A *written lease or home sharing agreement* that sets forth all of the guidelines for the home sharing arrangement.

Q: What happens if there are conflicts between or among home sharers?

A: Shared housing residences have regular house meetings which may be facilitated by a professional or run by house members. All matters affecting the household are addressed at the meetings, as well as any conflicts between members of the house.

Q: Can Housing Choice Vouchers/Section 8 Certificates be used for shared housing?

A: Yes. HUD regulations sections 982.615-89 direct how shared housing can be used in these programs.

Q: Who can use shared housing under these programs?

A: Section 8 participants can share with a live-in aide, another person with a Section 8 voucher, or an unrelated person without a voucher.

Q: How many HAP contracts and leases would there be for four unrelated home sharers?

A: Four. There is a separate HAP contract and lease for each assisted "family". (Please note: Housing Authorities call each assisted person or household a "family")

Q: How are rents determined when a Section 8 Voucher is used?

A: Each assisted person pays a pro-rata portion of the reasonable rent for the shared housing dwelling unit, which is determined by dividing the number of bedrooms used by the homesharer by the total number of bedrooms in the unit. The current Fair Market Rents for your community can be found on the web at www.huduser.org/datasets/FMR

Q: Can you give an example of how this would work for four unrelated individuals sharing a four-bedroom home, say in Dauphin County?

A: Yes. First, the home must rent for \$ 850 or less per month, which is the maximum Fair Market Rent for a four-bedroom home in Dauphin County. Second, the actual rent for each room would be one-fourth of the total rent, or \$212.50/month. Assuming each individual receives SSI of \$551/month, the rent would be 30% of his/her income, or \$165/month. The HAP contract between the landlord and the PHA would be the difference, or \$47.50 per month per homesharer. The landlord would receive four times \$47.50, or a total of \$190 a month from the Housing Authority.

Q: What if the owner lives in the unit?

A: The owner of a shared housing unit may reside in the unit and enter into a HAP contract with the Housing Authority. However, housing assistance may not be paid on behalf of the owner, nor may any person receiving assistance be related to the owner by blood or marriage.

Q: What determines whether or not Section 8 can be used for shared housing in a particular jurisdiction?

A: Generally, in order for Section 8 to be used for shared housing the PHA must include shared housing as a “special housing type” in its Administrative Plan. Contact your local PHA for a copy of their Administrative Plan.

Q: Are there any exceptions to that rule?

A: Yes. A person with a disability can request to use a Section 8 voucher in a shared housing situation as a reasonable accommodation, even if the PHA does not have shared housing designated as a “special housing type” in their Plan.

Q: What zoning issues should I be aware of if I start a shared housing program?

A: You will need to check the definition of “family” in the municipal zoning ordinance. This definition establishes the number of unrelated individuals that are permitted to live together as a single housekeeping unit.

Q: Is there a successful match-up program in Pennsylvania?

A: Yes. In fact there are two match-up programs in Southeastern Pennsylvania, both operated by non-profit organizations. The first program, for Chester County residents, is called Homeshare and is operated by the YWCA in Chester County. The program has been in existence for 19 years, and has helped to make hundreds of matches between home providers and home seekers, including people with disabilities. The program targets home seekers with incomes below \$8,000 a year and ensures rents of no more than \$400 per month. A criminal background check is conducted on all applicants. For more information contact Jodi J. Jones, Homeshare Coordinator, YWCA Chester County, 610-692-3737 or jonesywca@comcast.net. Website: www.ywca.org

Q: What is the other match-up program?

A: The second program, which serves individuals with all disabilities, is being operated by Residential Living Options, Inc. (RLO) in Chester and Delaware Counties. They hold three bi-monthly meetings in Chester County and one in Delaware County to provide an opportunity for potential homesharers to meet socially and to identify someone with whom they would like to share. Early in the process the homesharers fill out a Roommate Questionnaire that they use as the basis for further discussion about their housing preferences. RLO is in the process of developing a life skills curriculum to add to the bi-monthly meeting agendas. One couple has recently moved in together and several others are looking for apartments to share. For more information, contact Diane Belnavis, RLO at 610-518-6242 or dbelnavisrloinc@aol.com.

Q: Is there also a successful group shared residence in Pennsylvania?

A: Yes. CHAPS, a nonprofit organization serving Crawford County, has operated two group shared residences for people with mental illness since 1993. One residence serves 3 women and the other serves 4 men, many of whom were formerly homeless. Each homesharer has his/her own bedroom and

shares the common areas. The homes, which CHAPS rents from a private landlord, come fully furnished. Although there are no subsidies, the rents are quite affordable: \$140 per month for individuals receiving public assistance and \$275 for individuals receiving SSI, including all utilities, laundry facilities and cable. All homesharers sign a Shared Housing Contract that sets basic household rules including an agreement to maintain a level of physical and mental health. The residences are permanent housing, and people are staying as little as one month and as long as 8 years.

Q: Do the CHAPS homesharers receive any services?

A: Although there are no on-site staff, most residents receive case management or services of a Supported Living Worker through the County Mental Health Office. In addition, CHAPS staff assists with household issues on an as needed basis. In Crawford County the shared housing program has been serving as a stepping stone to other affordable housing opportunities--- residents establish a housing record that can later serve as a landlord reference. In fact, following their stay in shared housing most of the former residents have successfully moved to their own apartments. At the present time both shared residences are adding vocational components to foster their conversion to Fairweather Lodges. For more information contact Lynne McUmbler, Director of CHAPS at 814- 333-2924.

Q: Are sample documents available if I want to set up a shared housing program?

A: Yes. Sample documents that address the following are available from Diana T. Myers and Associates, Inc. at the address below:

- Roommate Questionnaire
- Lease
- Landlord Agreement

Q: Is technical assistance available if I need additional help in setting up a shared housing program?

A: Yes. The Office of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services (OMHSAS) provides technical assistance through its housing consultant on developing new housing options including shared housing. Contact John Ames at OMHSAS at 717-705-9510 for approval.

Q: Where can I get more information?

A: For more information on shared housing, contact the National Shared Housing Resource Center at www.nationalsharedhousing.org.

For more information on how to use shared housing for persons with mental illness, contact Diana Myers at Diana T. Myers and Associates, Inc. at 215-576-7970 or dtmdtma@hotmail.com

For more information on reasonable accommodation contact HUD or your local Fair Housing Council.