

Housing Choices

A Newsletter for Mental Health Professionals

Spring 2004

Sponsored by the Pennsylvania Office of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services

Unique Partnership Provides Real Life Living Experiences For Adolescents

By Peggy Robertson

Collaboration has become a necessity for many agencies in order to maximize resources and provide services that will truly meet the needs of people with disabilities. It is therefore very exciting to learn about an agency that is thinking outside of the box to create a unique and innovative collaboration.

Focused On Living, a program designed to teach homemaking and community living skills to young people with disabilities, is a joint effort between the Capital Area Intermediate Unit (CAIU), the Cumberland-Perry Housing Initiatives (CPHI) and the Redevelopment Authority of Cumberland County (RACC). The purpose of the program is to provide an environment for learning life skills in an authentic setting. To create this environment, the three entities worked together to purchase a home that would become a training facility.

The CPHI purchased a property on a residential street in Mechanicsburg, Pennsylvania with financing from a conventional lender for \$75,000, a \$100,000 grant from the Pennsylvania Housing Finance Agency, a \$10,000 County Community Development Block Grant, and a \$20,000 grant from the Cumberland County Housing Authority reserves. During the purchasing process, the

intermediate unit reserved the right to approve the site, and under an initial lease agreement of five years with two consecutive five-year renewals, agreed to pay a monthly rent and cover the costs of any repairs under \$1,000. CPHI agreed to pay taxes, insurance and major maintenance expenses, make mortgage payments, and rehabilitate the house with funds secured by RACC. Part of the rehabilitation included the addition of a first floor bedroom, accessible bathroom and laundry area, as well as an accessible entrance.

Planning for the home began in 2002, construction began in June 2003 and was completed in October 2003. By November 17, 2004 the home was up and running. Since the home is considered a "training facility" rather than a group home, a special zoning exception had to be obtained.

Focused On Living provides a real-life classroom experience for students who come from different Intermediate Unit classrooms in the Capital area. Students come to the house two days a week for a nine-week marking period. During the 2003 - 04 school year students range in age from 16 to 21 with a concentration on high school seniors, but next year the CAIU is planning on taking younger students who will have an opportunity to take the course over multiple marking periods. The curriculum is developed by the Teacher, Ruth Knapp, and Project Coordinator, Lori Holtzinger, who staff the house along with an educational paraprofessional. Although students do not get course credit towards graduation, they are

(Continued on page 2)

Inside This Edition...

<i>Stepping Stones</i>	3
<i>626 Co-op</i>	5
<i>Lawrence County Street Count</i>	7
<i>Upcoming Housing Specialist Meeting</i>	9
<i>Photo from Statewide LHOT Meeting</i>	10

(*Focused On Living* continued from page 1)

learning the skills that they will ultimately need for successful independent living.

The house provides a wonderful training ground for students with disabilities to learn independent living skills in a home. The house rules are posted on the wall with an emphasis on everyone treating each other equally and with respect. Students are taught a number of critical skills such as using the telephone, cooking, cleaning, doing laundry, changing beds and learning how to interact with strangers. This important interaction occurs when each student gets to invite an adult guest to a meal once a marking period. The students, staff and guests all eat together, and this gives the students practice in making conversation with someone they don't know.

The Project Coordinator and staff often create situations, or sabotage circumstances so that the students have to ask for help. For example, the staff might cause a problem with an appliance. The students then have to call a repair person in order to fix the problem, a real life situation that teaches students skills that they will need for the rest of their lives. At the end of each day, every student is evaluated and this information is documented to show how well each individual met his or her specific goal areas, and includes an assessment on how well each

individual did on goal areas that weren't previously identified.

Lori Holzinger, Project Coordinator, explained that students come to the house on Tuesdays and Wednesdays or Thursdays and Fridays. The house can comfortably accommodate four to five students because some students come with a provider and one student uses a wheelchair. When the lights are on in the home, students know they are welcome to come in.

Currently, *Focused On Living* is a day program, but CAIU is planning on expanding the curriculum to include after school activities and an opportunity for students to spend the night. The CAIU is looking to partner with other agencies such as The Arc to provide overnight supervision.

The CAIU is trying to get a van donated because transportation to the program has been a problem. The students rely on school bus transportation not only to and from the facility, but for activities such as grocery shopping. However, the *Focused On Living* house is within four blocks of a public bus route, which is utilized as a learning experience.

Unfortunately the public bus cannot be relied on as the main mode of transportation because it does not run frequently enough.

The students participating in the program are still living at home

with their parents or in foster care. Although the students have not provided much direct feedback, their families and teachers have heard how much they enjoy the program.

Focused On Living has met with a lot of success and has great potential to expand. In addition, the program is an exemplary model that can be replicated. In fact, a consortium of school districts is starting a similar facility in Carlisle. Cumberland County's Housing Authority owns the property which is a new construction, single-story ranch house. The main operating funder will be the Carlisle school system.

Chris Gulotta, Executive Director of RACC, recommended that when considering developing a similar program, it helps to have people with expertise in grant writing and real estate development. He noted that possible funding sources are the Pennsylvania Housing Finance Agency, Community Development Building Grants, County Affordable Housing Trust Funds, Housing Authority Reserves, Private Foundations and Banks.

Thanks to an innovative collaboration and creative thinking, *Focused On Living* is preparing students with disabilities for real life experiences and developing their independent living skills.

An Exemplary Program Serves Youth Well

By Peggy Robertson

Jennifer Hitz, Program Director for Stepping Stone Transitional Living Program, a service of the Centre County Youth Service Bureau, asked a group of housing specialists to ponder the following question. *At what age do people become independent?* Answers from the group ranged from 21 years old to never. Ms. Hitz explained that generally speaking, most people do not become independent until age 25 and sometimes not until they are in their 30's. She was emphasizing the point that it is very difficult for 'youth in transition' at age 18 to have all the skills necessary to live independently.

About ten years ago the Federal government recognized that at age 18, teens in foster care or in shelters were leaving their homes without the necessary independent living skills. In response, The Runaway and Homeless Youth Act was passed that established Transitional Living Programs (TLPs). Stepping Stone, located in State College, Pennsylvania, was one of the first 45 programs to be funded in the United States.

Stepping Stone is a program for youth who come from shelters, the streets, foster homes, etc. and have no permanent housing options. Although the program is located in Centre County, Pennsylvania, youth are accepted from any county in the

Commonwealth. There are only four federally funded TLPs in Pennsylvania and therefore Stepping Stone gets a wide geographic range of referrals, including some from out of state. Funding for the program is from the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act as well as the McKinney-Vento program.

Stepping Stone is a transitional residential program that provides housing for males and females ages 16 – 21 for 365 days of the year. Each potential resident must fill out an extensive application and undergo an interview process to ensure that he or she is a good fit for the program.

Sometimes applicants are invited to do a weekend visit in the home to further assess their appropriateness. The goal of Stepping Stone is to serve 24 youth a year through their residential programming, which includes the Phase III house. This house is designed to be a "pseudo"-apartment and is therefore not staffed 24 hours a day. In addition, Stepping Stone has an active non-residential program that intensively serves about 20 youth each year.

The Stepping Stone program owns two adjacent houses in downtown State College, Pennsylvania. Residents who are on the orientation phases and Phase I and Phase II of the

program reside in the main house, which is staffed 24 hours a day. The adjacent house is the Phase III house. Residents in the Phase III program are required to support themselves through paying a standard rent to Stepping Stone, buying their own groceries, maintaining the house, and effectively managing their individual schedules and free time. This way, residents can determine whether they are ready to move into their own apartment or if there are still life skills they would like to learn.

The program has six top tools to assess and aid youth. One tool is Ed Vogel's Specialized Treatment Services listed below which gives youth a guideline for behavior.

- Admit all problems and mistakes.
- Be in control of yourself.
- Understand and deal with your past.
- Learn the effects of your behavior on others.
- Develop social skills to improve your relationship with others.
- Correct negative, distorted, violent thoughts and fantasies.
- Control your anger.

(Continued on page 4)

(Stepping Stone continued from page 3)

- Show respect for authority and laws.
- End your victim behavior and mentality.
- Plan your future.
- Use your values to guide your behavior.
- Develop a healthy and realistic respect for yourself.

The other five tools include:

- Life Skill Assessments
- Individual Meetings with Staff at least four times a week
- Referrals to Outside Individual and Group Counseling Resources
- Weekly Life Skills Workshops
- Finding a positive person or persons to connect with each youth to create a life long support system

Currently, the main house is fully occupied with seven residents. Since residents come from a variety of backgrounds, the only issue that is consistent is that they are all in need of permanent housing. In addition, the diagnoses of the youth who come into the program include a variety of mental health disorders such as ADHD, Bi-Polar, Schizoaffective Disorder and Reactive Detachment Disorder. Residents can stay in the program for up to 18 months, during which time they are required to meet individually

four times a week with staff, must complete a high school education, and obtain and maintain employment.

Each staff person within Stepping Stone has specific areas of life skills education that he or she teaches to the residents. The Life Skills Coordinator teaches the hard, tangible skills such as budgeting and cooking. The Case Supervisors teach the soft, intangible skills such as developing emotional networks. The Aftercare Coordinator identifies what the residents will need post Stepping Stone such as researching colleges and looking for apartments. Stepping Stone's Residential Counselors pick up other life skill needs of the youth that are sometimes less pressing than others, including SAT preparation and driver's permit exam preparation.

Another important life skill the residents learn is financial management. 25% of each resident's salary goes to Stepping Stone for rent (there is a cap on how much they contribute) and 25% goes into a savings account which the residents have access to upon leaving the program (the average savings for youth who reside in the program for at least one year is \$2,000). The Life Skills Coordinator helps teach the

youth how to spend, or not spend the remaining 50% of their income. Residents also receive guidance in budgeting their free time and are encouraged to take part in the same types of activities as other adolescents.

Because there is not an in-house counselor or doctor, the residents are taught how to find the resources that will help them. As appropriate, they learn different interviewing techniques in order to identify professionals who can meet their needs, and they learn how to end counseling when it is no longer effective.

Stepping Stone provides youth with stable, safe, living accommodations and services that help them develop the skills necessary to move to independence. Although residents can stay in the home 18 months, the average length of stay is eight months to a year. However a lot of the residents stay in contact after they leave the program and the statistics show that 80 – 90% of the youth maintain employment and permanent housing for at least one year post Stepping Stone. Those statistics show that Stepping Stone is incredibly effective and provides youth with the skills they need to live independently.

A Remarkable Living Arrangement in Pennsylvania

By Peggy Robertson

In the summer of 2002, Milestones Community Healthcare, Inc., a subsidiary of Salisbury House, Inc. that provides housing and other supports for people with mental illness, completed the first stage of a unique conversion process. People living in CRR's owned by Milestones were given the choice to move into a home that had been purchased and renovated to house nine individuals, each of whom would have his or her own bedroom. The innovative part of this venture is that the house, licensed as a personal care home, became the first co-operative living arrangement for people with disabilities in Pennsylvania.

"626 Co-op" became incorporated as a non-profit organization with a board of directors consisting of all of the residents, and Fran McDonald, Mental Health Director of Milestones. Attorneys with Regional Housing Legal Services (RHLS) have been providing pro bono assistance to the residents on how to become Co-op members, including how to serve on the board of directors, take control of their shared home and establish by-laws. Mr. McDonald stated, "It is good to see people who have always been dictated to in the past now being able to make their own decisions."

As a member of the Co-op, each resident has three levels of privacy: exclusive use of his or her own bedroom, shared use of a living room and bathroom for each cluster of three bedrooms, and shared use of a common kitchen, dining room, living room, and recreation room. Currently there are 9 residents in the home, 3 females who have bedrooms on the first floor, and 6 males who have bedrooms on the second floor. Most importantly, residents have part ownership of their home and have the option of living there for as long as they want.

Residents receive support services provided by Milestones. However, unlike traditional staffing arrangements that assign staff to specific homes, staff work as a team and are assigned to help each resident whenever and wherever that help is needed. This approach incorporates the recovery model and many of the features of the Community Treatment Team. This arrangement is also more flexible and efficient than home-based staffing models since staff does not need to stay in a location if they are not needed.

Almost two years since the co-op began, Roland Turk, C.O.O. of Milestones, and Mr. McDonald have been delightfully pleased with what's been happening. Mr. Turk

noted, "During the first year and a half our residents have had no hospitalizations and we attribute that to the house. When our clients were living in CRR's prior to moving here, there were incident reports almost every other day. Since they have been here there have been practically none."

Mr. Turk further commented on the Recovery Model. "It has been a paradigm shift in the roles for both staff and clients. According to the model, the answers to becoming independent are within the consumer's world and the consumer is responsible for getting much more involved in his or her own recovery. The professionals are there to do whatever is possible to help the residents take control of their own lives. Interestingly enough, this has been somewhat of a role reversal for some of the staff, who have had to be trained in the concept and implementation of the model. The residents have input in all of the decisions related to co-op living, and in some cases it is a balancing act to get the staff to take a back seat. The staff is there to provide some kind of oversight but not to be intrusive. This has allowed the residents to take more ownership of their lives and have control of their everyday living activities and the dynamics of the household."

(Continued on page 6)

(626 Co-op continued from page 5)

In addition to taking ownership of their lives, the residents are getting ready to become official owners of their home. Milestones, a for-profit organization, is currently in the process of selling the home to the 626 Co-op, which as already noted, has been incorporated as a non-profit organization. Each resident will receive a \$1,000 "forgivable loan" which they will use to buy a share in the co-op. This share gives the resident access to a private bedroom, other common areas and a say in how the house is being run. The hope is that the money will be invested, and if a resident moves out, he or she will be entitled to any interest earned on the initial \$1,000. Living expenses are paid for through 72% of each resident's Social Security Income, specifically for room and board. In addition, county CRR payments and personal care home supplements help to cover the costs of staff, maintenance and support services. As a non-profit organization, the goal is to break even and perhaps even to establish a fund that can be used for repairs and operating costs.

The 10-member Board of Directors of the 626 Co-op includes a President, Vice-President, Secretary and Treasurer. Mr. McDonald is the only non-resident on the Board. As mentioned, all residents are on the Co-op Board and are expected to attend Board meetings which are held every Monday morning. The officers

meet every Wednesday morning and there is a house meeting once a week with the main focus of building a greater sense of community within the house. The President of the Board would like to raise funds so that residents do not have to pay such a large percentage of their incomes for room and board. He recognized that as a non-profit organization, they can seek contributions, and he and the board are now brainstorming different fundraising ideas.

If problems arise, they are discussed at house meetings. For example, if someone decides to move out, a search committee would be formed to identify a new resident. The same process would take place if new staff needed to be hired. Up until now there has been no need to call emergency meetings but this could be done by anyone at anytime. The amount of support varies for each resident since everyone is at a different stage of recovery.

One of the positive aspects of living in the co-op is that the residents have been helpful to each other. Also, because each individual needs a different level of support, the person who is more independent becomes a role model for the other residents. In fact, the President of the Co-op Board is ready for the next step to independence and is planning on moving into his own apartment by the end of the summer. He is looking forward to the freedom of being on his own, however he plans to

continue his role as Board President because he completely supports the co-op and the recovery model.

The president described the role of the board and the house in more detail. "As a group and with help from staff, we established house rules. Any issues regarding the house are discussed at our meetings but personal issues remain confidential and are discussed with staff and not the clients. I really believe that the program the co-op is developing will make it easier for people to make the transition to independence and moving out, if that is what a person wants. I have achieved a greater level of independence and try to set an example for my house mates. When I first moved in I had a part time job and now I am working full time. I also own my own car, and if I have the time, try to give people rides. I get along pretty well with the others and whenever possible and appropriate, help resolve differences, especially if they involve me!"

When asked whether or not the residents saw the co-op as a better living arrangement than where they were in the past, the president replied, "I think people accept this as a better way of living. The goal of the recovery model is to become independent, and I think the residents here can achieve even greater levels of independence. As president, I have come to

(Continued on page 8)

Street Count Gives Bigger Picture of Homelessness

By Peggy Robertson

The Point In Time Survey is a tool used by the Pennsylvania Regional Homeless Assistance Process to determine how many people are in homeless shelters or transitional housing programs on any given night. The shelter providers are given survey forms to collect information about the number and characteristics of people receiving homeless assistance in each county across the state. The information collected that night helps to quantify the number of homeless individuals in the participating communities. After these numbers are tabulated, they are used in future grant applications for federal dollars for homeless housing and services.

The Point In Time Survey provides the following information:

- Number of *single* individuals spending the night in shelters, bridge and transitional housing
- Number of *families* spending the night in shelters, bridge and transitional housing
- If individuals experience any of the following circumstances - Serious Mental Illness, Chronic Substance Abuse, HIV/AIDS, Victim of Domestic Violence, Other Disability and/or Under 21 and not with a family

The survey also asks for an estimate of unsheltered homeless, that is, people living on the streets, in a car, not including people who are doubled up.

What the count does *not* include are homeless people who are unsheltered. There are individuals, young mothers and their children, who are anywhere other than a shelter or a home. This includes living in cars, on the streets, in caves, or other places not intended for human habitation. These are the people that Lawrence County wants to reach out to and identify.

Lawrence County Social Services and the Lawrence County Housing Coalition joined forces on January 15th, 2004 in order to locate homeless people not in shelters on the same night that the Point In Time Survey was conducted. Kathy Presnar, Housing Program Development Coordinator for Lawrence County Social Services said, "Our goal is to get people to trust us. We want to let people know who we are and want them to feel comfortable with us. After we find out who the people are that are truly homeless, we can find out what their housing needs are and work with them to help them meet those needs."

Ms. Presnar described the survey. "In order to prepare for our 'street count', we did some

preliminary work. The Housing Coalition, which represents about twenty agencies, and the local state police, were able to identify areas where homeless people have been picked up in the past or where they have been seen. People have been found living on the streets, in cars, in caves, in abandoned buildings. Based on this information, the Housing Coalition and Lawrence County Social Services targeted four geographic areas where they would do their count – one area downtown and then three outlying areas. About 12 people divided into four groups and we went out to do the count from 10:00 P.M. until a little after midnight."

Ms. Presnar explained, "A couple of days prior to the count we went to shelters that were offering free lunches and announced that we would be out that night and would have blankets, warm clothing, food and other necessities available. We didn't want to 'intrude' on people and thought that by letting as many people as possible know when we were going on the streets they might feel comfortable coming out to us."

Ms. Presnar continued, "The night we went out was below freezing. It wasn't a surprise that only one person came out.

(Continued on page 8)

(Street Count continued from page 7)

When it is that cold, people become 'situated' and don't want to move. However, we knew that seven people had been out because they came into our offices the next day. About half of these people that we had contact with came back and we are in the process of helping them to obtain housing. The others have chosen to stay 'out' but have come in for other things such as blankets and food."

When asked whether or not they would continue to do street counts, Ms. Presnar replied, "Based on our experience, we want to do our street count differently. We are planning on doing them quarterly during different seasons. We also want to get more information out advertising what we are doing.

We were also thinking about making our counts more 'thematic'. For example, one night we would offer hygiene products, another night we could open up a soup kitchen. We thought we could have the soup kitchen at a neutral downtown facility that would allow us to use their basement. What we really want is an opportunity to talk to these people, gain their trust and be able to locate programs for them that will meet their housing needs."

Ms. Presnar then discussed another issue. "One of our side goals is to build more community awareness. Lawrence County is very rural so people don't see many homeless individuals because they aren't really out and about. Therefore, many people in our area don't believe that homelessness is a problem."

The Lawrence County Point In Time Survey conducted through the PA Regional Homeless Assistance process showed that there were 51 individuals and 14 families (which consisted of 15 adults and 32 children) in shelters and transitional housing on January 15, 2004. 46 individuals and 4 families were considered chronically homeless - 30 of the individuals and 3 families that were in shelters had been continuously homeless for a year or longer, and 16 individuals and 1 family had been homeless 4 or more times in the past 3 years.

This Street Count conducted in Lawrence County is an initial step in finding out a much more accurate count of the homeless people who need assistance.

(626 Co-op continued from page 6)

understand that any decisions we make as a co-op will only be successful if there is effort on everyone's part. Most of the time the effort needed is not great, but for some people, a little effort can be a lot. Part of my job has been convincing everyone that the effort will benefit all of us. I was pleased that at our last meeting there was more vocalization. We still need to work on growing as a community. I think this can be done by planning house trips and activities and having

recreation in the house that we can do as a community. I am ready to live on my own but will remain involved in the co-op. My goal is to become a client advocate."

One thing Mr. Turk stressed is that the co-op is still in the beginning stages. "It is an ongoing process that evolves, and a community is being created. But there is no doubt that this house has provided stability for the residents. This is their home where they can relax. They are also learning

greater communication skills and conflict resolution. In fact, we are all learning and are all willing to implement changes. One of my frustrations is that it has been a very slow process and many aspects of setting up the co-op have been complex because there are so many different entities involved. However, moving at a slow and deliberate pace has helped us avoid making mistakes. We can truly serve as a model for the rest of the state because remarkable things have been happening here."

Upcoming OMHSAS Housing Specialist Meeting

Wednesday, June 9, 2004 - 10:00 A.M. - 3:00 P.M.

***Department of Conservation and Natural Resources (DCNR)
400 Market Street
Rachel Carson State Office Building, Room 105
Harrisburg, PA 17105***

Tentative Agenda Topics

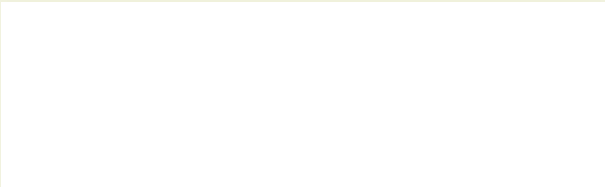
Update on the PATH Program
Using Personal Care Supplements in the Community
Western Housing Conference Report
PATH PLUS Update
626 Co-Op
Wernersville Service Area Planning Team

For more information please contact Mona Weinstein at 215-576-1558.

Over 75 people attended the March 10, 2004 Statewide LHOT Meeting which was sponsored by the Pennsylvania Office of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services (OMHSAS).

Attendees were welcomed by OMHSAS Deputy Secretary Joan Erney. Participants then took part in the Appreciative Interview Process, pictured at right.

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We welcome your submissions, ideas for articles, and information on related housing efforts and projects. If you have information about a related project or would like more information about a project described here, please contact us at the following address: Diana T. Myers and Associates, Inc., 6 South Easton Road, Glenside, PA 19038
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