



House Rules in Supportive Housing

GENERAL PRINCIPLES

In a supportive housing program, the House Rules is a document that sets forth how the community defines the behaviors associated with good tenancy and community. It is typically either a part of or an addendum to the tenant's lease. Compliance with the House Rules is a condition of tenancy. Crafting and enforcing a set of House Rules can be a complex and difficult process. Following are some basic guidelines that may be helpful:

Generally speaking, a supportive housing sponsor should establish rules that:

- Are specific, concrete and clearly related to the terms of the tenant's lease.
- Mirror the philosophy and intent of the supportive housing community.
- Create expectations that can reasonably be met by the tenants.
- Aid in building a supportive community of neighbors engaged and invested in each other's welfare.

TIPS FOR DESIGNING HOUSE RULES IN SUPPORTIVE HOUSING

Purpose of the House Rules: When designing house rules, consider the intent behind the rule. Rules should have a clear purpose that should be understood by the community. Divisions are created within the community when rules are perceived to be for the convenience or benefit of a few.

Enforceability: How the rules will be enforced and the process for enforcing them is key. Consistency is necessary when enforcing rules in a building. Rules that cannot be uniformly enforced should be excluded from the list. If it is discovered that a rule is not enforceable, consider other ways the same idea might be encouraged voluntarily.

Legality: Rules have to be consistent with applicable federal, state, and local laws.

Simplicity: Having a few enforceable rules is far more effective than pages of rules that cannot be enforced or even effectively communicated.

Note: This document is included within the *Housing Operations* section of CSH's *Toolkit for Developing and Operating Supportive Housing*, which is available at www.csh.org/toolkit2. This document has been adapted from the HUD-funded curriculum, *Issues in the First Year*, which is available at www.csh.org/training.

Tenant Input: Experience has shown that there are several advantages to having tenants participate in developing the rules of their building. Tenants are then more likely to incorporate them into practice and to remind others to do the same. Rules can both reflect and help influence the culture and norms of a building. The process of tenants and staff meeting to discuss house rules can be beneficial for community building and have therapeutic outcomes for tenants with special needs.

Development: Rules can and should be changed to meet the needs of the tenants living in the building. It is essential to create a structure and a process to review and revise rules. Having a process in place for residents to file grievances and to appeal sanctions for rules violations ensures that the rights of residents are protected and that residents are confident that rules are fairly enforced.

DO:

- Establish rules relating to payment of rent and other fees. Examples:
 - Rent is due on the first of the month.
 - Payment received after the fifth of the month will initiate a financial penalty of \$25 payable within 10 days.
 - Late payments will generate an automatic notice to support services staff.
- Establish rules relating to maintaining the unit and the property. Examples:
 - Walls may not be painted or wallpapered without permission from management.
 - Visitors may stay up to seven consecutive nights, after which they must have property management and supportive service staff approval to remain in the unit.
 - Household income must be verified annually.
- Establish rules relating to tenancy behaviors that could interfere with the rights of others to health, safety or the peaceful enjoyment of the premises. Examples:
 - Children may not play in the halls unsupervised.
 - Tenants may not tamper with the alarm systems or any building safety equipment.
 - Quiet hours must be observed between 11:00 p.m. and 7:00 a.m.
- Develop a specific written policy on substance abuse, specifying what behaviors are prohibited in the building and in the tenant's unit. Focus as much as possible on the behaviors resulting from misuse of substances, rather than on the substance use itself.
- Develop clear written policies for how rules will be enforced.
 - What behaviors will generate a notice from property management?
 - How many notices will be provided to tenants on behavior issues?
 - What behaviors/issues will not be tolerated and will require immediate initiation of eviction proceedings?

- Explain all house rules to tenants during a preoccupancy conference and annually during their income recertification. Ensure the tenant understands their obligations as a leaseholder and also understands the community will support them in being responsible.

DON'T:

- Create rules that are legally unenforceable, vulnerable to legal disputes and inconsistent with the philosophy of supportive housing as an independent living environment. Such rules tend to fall into the category of institutional rules or program rules. Examples:
 - Rules requiring the tenant's participation in services.
 - Rules prohibiting visitors of the opposite gender.
 - Rules requiring a tenant return to their unit by a particular time each night.
- Create rules that are so vague that neither tenants or staff can understand what they mean. "Tenants must observe reasonable quiet hours" is open to a wide range of interpretation. "Loud television, music or other noise is not permitted between 11:00 p.m. and 7:00 a.m." is clear and concrete.
- Create rules that are excessively detailed, such as specifying the exact types of cleaning products tenants may use. Overwhelming tenants with written rules is counterproductive and enforcing excessively detailed policies will consume inordinate amounts of staff time.
- Create rules you have no intention of enforcing, or which are impossible to enforce.

TIPS FOR STARTING A HOUSE RULES COMMITTEE

- ❖ Define the purpose of the House Rules Committee in relation to your program mission.
- ❖ Discuss the process of involving residents in designing house rules with staff and allow an opportunity to question things such as: the clinical value of the process, the possible lack of staff expertise in this area, and the significant time commitment required to create an effective process.
- ❖ Don't be too cautious in getting started. Allow resident partners to help you to define the process.
- ❖ Create a flyer, translated into all relevant languages spoken by residents, stating the purpose of the Committee.
- ❖ Talk it up! Make sure that each resident feels personally invited and that their input is welcome. Encourage people who have expressed dissatisfaction with house rules to attend.
- ❖ Invite the chairs of existing committees, groups or resident associations. Some examples may be a beautification committee, reading club or recovery group.
- ❖ Offer refreshments at meetings whenever possible.
- ❖ Monitor the demographic composition of the first meeting. Are all racial, ethnic, genders, etc. represented? If not, discuss outreach efforts to diversify the group.
- ❖ Keep meetings focused on both the product (reviewing house rules) and the process (involving residents in making decisions about their homes).
- ❖ Identify which rules are not negotiable and why.