Thinking Beyond "NIMBY": Building Community Support For Supportive Housing

The document is taken from Chapter 8 in CSH's publication *Family Matters: A Guide to Developing Family Supportive Housing*, available at www.csh.org/publications. It discusses issues related to addressing community concerns, and building community support, that is relevant for supportive housing for any target population.

You begin to build public support for your supportive housing project as soon as you begin talking to others about your program. While you gather information from other agencies, while you build a team to deliver housing and supportive services, while you approach potential funders, you are already teaching others about the value of supportive housing. When you are talking to others, you should be sure to keep an eye out for politicians, service providers and clergy who can provide support for your housing program.

These, however, are probably the easy audiences. It can be much tougher to build needed support for your program from its new neighbors. This is particularly true if your housing will be a single congregate development, since that concentrates the residents in one place. It is also particularly true of sponsor-owned housing, since a new building or renovation often requires a series of city or neighborhood approvals.

It may be tempting to surround yourself with those you know will support your ideas but, if you do, you will miss opportunities to address legitimate neighborhood concerns in ways that will improve your supportive housing program. This chapter will help you understand the underlying concerns behind neighborhood opposition to supportive housing and suggest techniques to build support for your supportive housing program. While some of these concerns and responses refer specifically to siting sponsor-owned housing, you can use many of the techniques to build support for any type of supportive housing.

NIMBY: A Polarizing Term

Most of us have heard the term "Not In My Back Yard", or "NIMBY", in reference to the resentment fueling neighbors' rejection of affordable housing nearby. Among supporters of affordable housing, the term NIMBY conjures up visions of large, angry crowds of citizens jammed into local planning and zoning hearings, threatening legal action to bar the development of any housing or land use that they perceive as lowering the value of their homes or interfering with the tranquillity of their community. We may depict the NIMBY crowd as narrow-minded, self-interested, sometimes violent home owners who are resistant to reason and uncaring about those less fortunate. While this may be true about some people in some struggles, more often what underlies resistance to supportive housing are fears — some legitimate, some not. You should try to understand those fears so that you can respond to them appropriately.

Note: This document is included within the D*evelopment* 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 CSH's publication *Family Matters: A Guide to Developing Family Supportive Housing*, which is available at www.csh.org/publications.

The term "NIMBY" immediately pegs anyone who expresses concerns about your program or resists it as an adversary. Dismissing concerns about your supportive housing development as just part of the NIMBY phenomenon will not help you build neighborhood support that will provide a welcoming environment for supportive housing residents. Many of the concerns may be valid and if you make changes in your development plans to address them, you may build deeper neighborhood support and improve your development as well.

Common Neighborhood Concerns About Supportive Housing

The concerns of supportive housing opponents vary from community to community, neighborhood to neighborhood. However, here are some of the most common themes and ways to address them:

Supportive housing will lower my property values. This is a relatively simple argument to counter with documentation. Many studies have shown that there is no connection between the presence of supportive housing and the value of properties or owners' ability to resell their homes. Take the time to gather the data, obtain copies of studies and produce a one-page hand-out for concerned citizens. *Exhibit 7-A* provides more information about these studies and experts you can contact for further information. You may want to work with local Realtors, who have direct access to property sales data, to develop a similar study in your area. To ensure that the study is credible, the realtors should not be directly linked to your supportive housing project or receiving compensation.

Supportive housing will destabilize the properties immediately surrounding it. Neighbors may be concerned that your program will tolerate destructive behavior by formerly homeless residents. Opponents may be able to cite examples of other housing communities that negatively affected their neighbors. In fact, we all could probably identify affordable housing developments that were poorly managed. We also know that supportive housing residents occasionally will have difficulties that neighbors may perceive as threatening, such as a mental illness relapse. You should think about what these difficulties might be and ways to minimize the impact on the surrounding community.

Talk to neighbors of other supportive housing developments and gather their reactions to the presence of supportive housing in their neighborhood. If they feel that the housing is well-constructed and well-managed, what contributes to that perception? You may be able to incorporate those elements into your development.

Many neighbors may feel more comfortable if they know about the supportive service component of your program. Let them know that families who experience difficulties will have immediate access to staff who can intervene in crisis, and that neighbors will have someone to go to when they become concerned about the condition of the property or the behavior of residents. You should also accentuate the community-building aspect of supportive housing and its emphasis on peer accountability and support.

Don't dismiss people's concerns about promoting housing for families who have been trapped in homelessness. Like anyone else, they fear the unknown, and it is true that many of supportive housing residents may have lived lives that involved drugs, crime and/or violence. However, it is also true that these same families want a different life for themselves. Show that with supportive

housing, they will have the opportunity to live in a safe environment and receive support for choices that promote health and stability. You will be able to make these arguments more convincingly if, in your information-gathering stage, you have taken the time to talk to homeless families to find out why they became homeless and what they would like to change.

Supportive housing will quickly become an eye-sore. Often these concerns are based on perceptions of older public and subsidized housing complexes. Many of these projects were built with inferior design and materials, did not include enough funds for ongoing maintenance, and have been poorly managed, turning them into deteriorated neighborhood eye-sores.

It is right for citizens to be concerned about this, and you must be prepared to address their concerns. You can learn from the mistakes of these older housing complexes. Talk to your local public housing agency or HUD office to find out what was missing in older projects to ensure their ongoing maintenance. Take some time and walk around these projects. Note what is missing that you will want to include, such as good building materials, attractive design or sufficient green space. Take an architect or contractor with you to help you analyze what your development should do differently.

Finally, find ways to show neighbors that your housing will be of the same quality as the surrounding neighborhood. At any meetings about your development, show preliminary drawings illustrating the presentation of the housing from the street. Share information on the quality of the construction materials; bring samples. Make sure the architect is available to answer questions. Encourage neighbors to critique the design and make suggestions for changes.

Supportive housing tenants will bring crime into our area. Once again, this is a relatively easy argument to counter with information. Studies have shown that rather than contributing to neighborhood crime, many supportive housing programs have transformed blighted buildings that previously presented high crime hot spots in the community. In these instances, supportive housing became a neighborhood asset and mobilized a new resident base to combat crime.

Supportive housing will bring drugs into our community. Many neighborhoods either are currently fighting drug activity or are fearful that the drug epidemic striking other communities will follow residents with histories of alcohol or drug abuse. If neighbors raise this concern, use it as an opportunity to showcase your development's commitment to sobriety. To the extent that you can demonstrate your program's commitment to sobriety and a willingness to contribute to the larger community's fight against crime and drugs, neighbors may even view your supportive housing program as an ally.

The children residing in supportive housing have such extensive needs that our schools and community services will become overwhelmed. This is another reaction based on fear that you may be able to counter with information. In fact, many schools are currently stretched to capacity with overcrowded classrooms and overwhelmed special services, but that does not mean that your supportive housing development will worsen the situation. If children in your supportive housing development will be coming from the area and already attending local schools, be sure to let opponents know that there will not be an increase in demand on services.

Once again, learn what you can about conditions in your community: how your schools are funded overall, how special education has been funded, and whether special levies have been passed over

the past few years. You may discover that educational funding for special services actually has increased and is now supporting all children in the classroom. Alternatively, you may discover that local efforts to pass educational funding have repeatedly failed, which might offer you the opportunity to become an ally with an otherwise opponent because of your mutual commitment to public education.

Finally, let opponents know that your supportive housing program will help parents become involved in the academic achievement of their children. In the long run, this offers hope for children who might otherwise fail despite expensive educational interventions. Describe on-site supportive services that are geared to academic achievement. Demonstrate that your project will be making a positive commitment to support the efforts of the classroom teacher.

Supportive housing will increase traffic and place greater demand on emergency services. It is legitimate for a community to be concerned about increases in demand on its infrastructure. If the project will increase traffic, and this traffic may threaten children's safety, this should be your concern as well. Many problems with traffic can be resolved through selecting a good site for your housing. Your architect can help you conduct a study of the *density* (number of housing units within a certain amount of space) of your development to determine how it will affect local traffic patterns.

Often, neighbors' concerns are not the amount of traffic that the housing will attract, but the type. They assume that the residents will attract drug activity, requiring repeated police intervention. Again, collect data on the number of police calls to similar supportive housing sites, and use this as an opportunity to share your program's crime prevention aspects.

Supportive housing will bring people into our community who do not have the same values we hold. This attitude is based on a stereotype of homeless families as welfare-dependent, lazy and irresponsible. There are several arguments that can counter this stereotype. First, with few exceptions, most states have very strict welfare-to-work laws, requiring anyone who receives public assistance to be engaged in work readiness activities or be fully employed. The stereotype of the welfare-dependent family may need some updating because it will be harder and harder for families to depend on welfare alone. Second, an increasing number of homeless families have at least one working parent already. Finally, most of those with a past history of receiving welfare benefits do want to become employed, but they may need help reaching that goal — help that supportive housing can provide.

Discuss your program's education and employment activities with neighborhood opponents. Also, share some of the stories about homelessness you learned during your information-gathering stage if they underscore the families' desires for the same things the neighbors want: safety, pride in their neighborhood, good schools, health, and respect in the community and workplace. You may be able to identify homeless families who would be willing to talk to neighbors about these commonly shared values. Nothing can transform opponents' views like seeing the very people they fear step forward and share their dreams for a community who will accept them.

Supportive housing gives families something they haven't earned. A growing number of people believe that providing services promotes dependence. The argument often is articulated as, "I pulled myself up by my bootstraps and these families should too." In reality, nearly all of us can point to someone who helped us at a key time in our lives. Few of us succeed solely on our own merits.

Usually, this argument masks an underlying concern about the opponents' own economic security. Find out by getting to know the supportive housing opponents. Most home owners have their primary financial security tied up in the equity in their homes, and they worry that something could threaten that security. If this is their concern, as noted earlier, you can reassure them that supportive housing will not have a negative impact on their homes' value. Also, make sure that opponents know how supportive housing promotes families' independence through measures such as prompt rent collections, tenant skills training programs and employment training programs.

Techniques for Overcoming Community Fears

Developing relationships with neighbors of your supportive housing development is even more important than developing logical responses to their concerns. Fears of the unknown often do not respond to logic and facts. Learn more about these fears by asking neighbors to share them with you in a low-key environment. Identify the strongest opponents to your project and get close to them. Spend as much time as possible getting to know them, understanding their concerns, finding out where they get their information, and incorporating their concerns as much as possible into the project's design.

These techniques can help you get to know the neighbors of your development:

Informal discussions: Identify a neighbor who is willing to host a discussion about the supportive housing program. Come to the discussion more prepared to listen than to respond. Use this time to develop an understanding of their concerns. Spend the first meeting gathering their input, and schedule a second meeting to respond to their concerns. Follow up the initial meeting with one-on-one conversations, if possible, to build more personal relationships.

Open forums: Host open forums about your development and invite neighbors to come with their questions. Hold the forums as close to the proposed site as possible. If you will be renovating an abandoned or blighted building, try to hold the meeting within sight of the structure. If the building is safe, hold the meeting inside and provide tours explaining the improvements you are planning. Make sure you have an architect or contractor involved so they can answer any technical questions.

If you have already identified residents for your program, and if they are willing to participate, include them in the presentation of the plans. Spend time beforehand preparing them for their role and the potential response from neighbors. Be sure to coach everyone on the importance to remain polite and gracious in the face of opposition. Meeting personable residents can go a long way toward dispelling myths about poor and homeless families.

Ongoing Communication: If necessary, offer to help establish a neighborhood advisory committee who will meet regularly with supportive housing residents and staff to discuss the housing development.

In addition to developing your own relationship with potential opponents, you may want to appeal to respected community members or experts to support your program and help give it credibility with neighbors. These supporters might include:

Community Leader: Ask a community leader to work with you and help you present the facts about the development. This leader might be a member of the local clergy, a long-time resident or a member of the neighborhood council or block club. Make sure that you have an established relationship with the leader, that he or she is knowledgeable about your program, and that he or she is prepared to deal with a negative reaction from neighbors.

Outside Spokesperson: Select a spokesperson other than the sponsor or owner to represent the project who has strong presentation and interpersonal skills. The spokesperson should be able to remain calm when faced with angry, seemingly irrational neighbors and to de-escalate a situation and encourage dialogue. The spokesperson does not have to be the person with all the answers, but should know who on the supportive housing team is best able to answer questions. If the spokesperson is also a respected member of the community, all the better.

City Staff: If your housing program has already received support from city staff, invite officials such as the traffic engineer, the local police captain or a city planning staff member to come to a meeting or forum and address the specific concerns the neighbors might have.

Design Experts: If your city or town has a university, invite the architecture department to review your plans and submit letters of support. You may even find an architecture class that will create a three-dimensional model of the development to demonstrate that its scale and design will compliment the community.

Finally, know that some concerns will not be resolved until after the housing is built and neighbors have the chance to meet residents and to observe that their fears were not realized. When you get to know the neighbors of your supportive housing program, sometimes you will be able to address valid concerns in ways that improve your project. Other times, the concerns cannot be addressed, but you can establish a relationship with the community that will give residents of your program a sense of safety and comfort, if not a full welcome from their neighbors.

Example: Overcoming Resistance to a Supportive Service Center

The Irving Lake neighborhood energetically opposed the siting of a family supportive housing project. Neighbors expressed concern that the housing would invite "those people" into a neighborhood that was the last stronghold of elderly, mostly white home owners. The neighbors organized and called themselves the STOP Committee. The advance rhetoric of STOP sometimes included overt racism and bigotry, with home owners resisting any integration on the block. Home owners on other blocks in the neighborhood soon joined the resistance. They expressed fears that the project would bring in drug addicts, criminals and/or gang members into a "quiet, respectable" neighborhood. One home owner's son, an attorney, threatened legal action.

Home owners rejected efforts by center staff to talk one-on-one with them. The center solicited the aid of two politicians: a city council member who represented the block, and a state representative who lived close by. The center met with both politicians and explained the plans for the project. In addition to 16 units of rehabilitated housing (which at that time was substandard and in danger of demolition), the project would include a free drop-in day care center, a food shelf and an adult education center for parents seeking their GED. The services available on-site were designed to be shared with the community-at-large. It was true that many of those living on-site would be enrolled in a drug treatment program. It was true that many of the families included those referred by child protection and probation services.

The two politicians agreed to host a community forum about the project. The housing sponsor talked to a number of community leaders they thought would express support and invited them to the forum. From that group, the housing sponsor selected a local minister who was pastor to a number of the elderly homeowners to represent the center to the community. The minister's church had already donated a building to the project and pledged to support on-site services with volunteers and donations.

Before the meeting, the minister agreed to contact each household near the proposed site. The minister gathered some critical information:

- The most vocal opponents were the last four remaining homeowners on the block. They were part of what had been a close-knit group of 10 families who had moved in shortly before WW II, raised their children together and gone to the same church. Now all but four were either dead or in frail condition in nursing homes. Because the neighborhood had deteriorated, these four were unable to sell their homes so that they could relocate in senior housing. With their health failing, they felt vulnerable and trapped.

- Over the past several years, three of the four homes had been burglarized at least once. One homeowner living next to the proposed project had been hospitalized due to a break-in and mugging.

- Each of the homeowners was located at opposite corners of the block, leaving them feeling isolated and exposed. They viewed the location of the project between them as further isolating and exposing them to more pedestrian traffic that could result in break-ins. Also, they were worried that when the supportive services offices were closed at night, there would be no one to contact if there was trouble.

The first community forum was a short meeting to discuss the neighbor's concerns and answer specific questions about what types of programs, services and clientele the center would serve. More than 100 people attended, representing homeowners and their families as well as those renting the substandard units. Neighbors were surprised to learn about the type of programs that would be offered. Prospective tenants testified to the need for supportive housing. Their shared individual stories of their hopes for a stable life and support as they sought to change their lives around.

The minister and politicians polled the group to find out what services they would like to see at the center. They learned that the home owners had needs that the center could accommodate, such as including them in the food shelf program, a home-visitor program to check in on them, a community garden to beautify the block and a crime watch program and block club to deter crime and gang activity.

The second meeting had less than 50 in attendance. The angry group of homeowners from the other end of the neighborhood was not present. The meeting started out tense, but the two politicians kept the agenda focused on the ideas that were generated at the first meeting. The center offered to accommodate those ideas and added more, such as an evening neighbor watch program to make sure the area around the project was safe after hours, opening the supportive services office for more evening and weekend hours for children, and adding a housing committee to improve the condition of all the housing on the block.

At the end of the meeting, the politicians called for a vote on the approval of the center. The results were unanimous: the center could open on the block.

Within a year of opening the center, the block club had started an evening volunteer crime-watch patrol, encouraged increased police patrols of the area, and initiated a neighborhood phone network in case of emergencies. The center generated jobs for six families and provided more than 25,000 hours of drop-in childcare for 15 families.

That year, one of the original four homeowners broke a hip and had to move into a nursing home. The members of the block club and the housing committee organized a visiting team to call and visit her until she could come home. She never returned home, but when she died her family asked if her home could be converted into an expansion of the project.

Not all neighborhood opposition stories have such productive results, but this story shows that getting to know the opponents of supportive housing may convince them to take a chance on your program, and that you can build an even better program with their input.

Additional Literature:

Building Inclusive Community: Tools to Create Support for Affordable Housing
(HOMEBASE/The Center for Common Concerns, 1996.)

Neighbors, After All: Community Acceptance Strategies for Siting Housing and Services for Homeless People
(HOMEBASE/The Center for Common Concerns, 1990)

Managing Local Opposition to Affordable Housing: Strategies and Tools
(National Association for County Community Economic Development - NACCED and Association of Local Housing Finance Agencies - ALHFA, 1997.)

Siting of Homeless Housing and Services: Best Practices for Community Acceptance
(Community Acceptance Strategies Consortium - CASC, and Non-Profit Housing Association of Northern California - NPH, February 1999.)

Understanding and Overcoming the NIMBY Syndrome
(Dear, Michael. Journal of the American Planning Association, Vol. 58, No. 3, Summer 1992.)

Community Relations Strategies: A Handbook for Sponsors of Community-Based Programs For The Homeless
(Anello, Rose and Shuster, Tillie, New York, New York: Community Service Society of New York, Shelter Development Project, 1985.)

Working With The Community: A Developer's Guide
(Urban Land Institute, Washington, DC, 1985.)

A Handbook: Building Consensus for Affordable Housing, WP #2
(Wheeler, Michael, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Center for Real Estate Development, 1987.)

Siting Drug and Alcohol Treatment Programs, Legal Challenges to the NIMBY Syndrome
(U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Public Health Service, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, Center for Substance Abuse Treatment, Rockwall II, 5600 Fishers Lane, Rockville, MD 20852, Technical Assistance Publication (TAP) Series 14, 1995.)

Additional Resources:

HOMEBASE/The Center for Common Concerns
www.homebaseccc.org

National Association for County Community and Economic Development
www.nacced.org

National Association of Local Housing Finance Agencies
www.nalhfa.org

Non-Profit Housing Association of Northern California
www.nonprofithousing.org