Tenant Engagement Strategies in Scattered-Site Supportive Housing

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This paper walks new providers through the development of tenant engagement strategies in scattered-site supportive housing. Supportive housing is permanent, affordable housing linked to an array of voluntarily accessed services that help tenants remain housed and pursue their life goals. Rent paid is usually 30% of income. Tenants are lease holders with all rights and responsibilities afforded under Fair Housing Law and other protections. We begin with some general principles that should be recognizable to any supportive housing developer. From there we provide some broad rules of working with tenants, including the particular challenges facing scattered-site providers.

1. General Principles

- Our goal is to support the creation of a household that functions in a cooperative and productive manner.
- Our goal is to create a social network that will entice and attract individuals, give them a sense of belonging yet respect their need for privacy and individuality.
- We need to create networks for tenants that they can use in times of crisis. By getting to know one another and becoming comfortable with each other, tenants can be encouraged to develop peer networks and look out for one another.
- Whether the household has one or more than one person, the process of developing a cooperative and supportive environment is not linear. We might think that things are going well, routine chores are being carried out, people are getting along, but then something happens and the equilibrium changes. We have to understand that a household is dynamic and subject to changes. We might need to re-build relationships and skills that we thought tenants and staff had already acquired.
- The household is defined by the person or people living within it, rather than by physical place. Homes take on the personality of the person(s) living within.
- The process of finding housing and maintaining that housing must reflect consumer choice. Within the confines of legally required standards, a great deal of variation exists. It is our responsibility to find out what people need not to make people fit into agency needs.
- Developing relationships in a scattered site setting where we cannot control many variables requires creativity and the ability to “think on one’s feet. We must change the way we are accustomed to doing things.
- We treat tenants as partners rather than as recipients of service. Feedback is honest, genuine and based on behavioral observation rather than opinion.
- We must show consistency and not show favoritism to any particular tenant or individual.

II. Engaging tenants in scattered-site housing: a brief overview

Stages of Engagement

Practical Lessons: Several years ago, a National Symposium on Homelessness Research described a summary of engagement strategies used by many service providers. This provides a good overview for what we do. These strategies are important for all supportive housing providers, including those working with scattered-site tenants.

- Set the stage: Become a familiar face. Begin to establish credibility with tenants in a non-threatening manner. The process can start at the initial interview before the applicant is accepted for tenancy.
- Initiate the 'strategy': Engage potential tenants in conversation, and provide incentive items with real and perceived benefits that promote trust. Help tenants to meet important needs.
- Organize Activities: Informal interaction also comes in the course of tenant field trips organized across scattered sites to sporting and cultural events. By organizing tenants around events they want to attend-the support services staff can build rapport and better-grounded relationships.
- Proceed with outreach: Help tenants to define service goals and activities as trust is established.
- Be genuine: Be observant/share observations based on behavior, don't be afraid to reflect reality back to residents, e.g., “looks like you're losing weight.”
- 'Program' creatively: Organize support groups that are not perceived by tenants as 'programmy' or therapeutic. At one site, substance users were attending weekly meetings on substance use. When the meeting name was changed to “life enhancement” and dealt with more global issues such as issues of mental health, money management and independent life skills in addition to substance use, even more tenants attended.
- Be a Resource Specialist: Providing access to health information and services is often the hook which engages tenants. Once monthly health sessions with special speakers may be a way to facilitate this. Give choices and information.
- Maintain Consistency: Avoid showing any signs of favoritism. Enforce professional standards of conduct for staff including confidentiality, privacy of tenants.
- Be Inclusive: Solicit input. Play to tenants' strengths using asset-based engagement.

Why is engagement different in scattered site housing?

Many people prefer to live in scattered site or non-congregate housing because of a more normalized living atmosphere. They don’t feel that community members live in large groups selected because of their common experiences such as homelessness or disability; community members live wherever they can afford to and want to live.
Families moving to scattered site housing prefer their ability to choose being close to daycare, family members/support networks, schools, hospitals, public transportation, etc. This flexibility is especially appreciated.

Providers find that it is helpful to:

- Look at people's lifestyles such as how do people use their personal space.
- What are a person's daily schedules and habits?
- What hobbies does a person have?
- Understand travel logistics before moving into a house

Tenants who live in scattered site housing feel more independent and have more responsibility for their own actions. They are no longer subject to the constant oversight and presence of on site staff members that exist in a congregate setting. They enjoy the increased control over their lives and the increase in privacy.

At the same time, tenants are allowed to make mistakes which might lead to negative consequences, and as service providers we can help them understand their mistakes and grow from them. Tenants in scattered site housing take on more responsibility for their actions and behaviors.

A scattered site apartment setting requires the service provider to re-think the relationship and service provision structure that it has had with its clients. This new relationship affects how we do engagement.

Tenant engagement in scattered site housing becomes complicated by the lack of formal opportunities to come together in pre-designated community space. Community building activities can be harder to organize, and the risk for tenant isolation and potential for crises may be heightened. For some providers, the lack of community/on-site space presents opportunities as well as challenges. All understand that the engagement process is slow and gradual because of people's distrust of the mental health system.

We have to obtain our information for assessment purposes in new ways and ask a different set of questions.

- Is staying at home really a problem?
- Is something really positive going on in the house that makes the person want to stay there all day long?
- Has the person developed constructive relationships with people outside of service staff and those relationships are fulfilling the service staff role?
- Has your tenant always liked to spend time by herself or is this a new behavior? If time alone is new, then you have to evaluate the situation and decide if an intervention is needed.

Is Engagement Necessary?

As the service provider our responsibility is to ensure the safety and well being of all those living in the housing. While we need to have some type of relationship with all tenants, that relationship looks and is structured differently for each person.
Some people will maintain their relationship with the service provider relying on them for help and support and will develop social skills and relationships.

Some people, once they are housed, might decrease their interactions with their service provider because they feel that this relationship is not normalized or is intrusive. They feel that most people who have their own apartments don’t have case managers following them, and they want to be like most people.

Some people prefer limited contact with both service provider and peers. They might want to remain in the house for most of the day or stay in their room. If the person has a history of psychiatric problems, we might begin to worry that they are having an exacerbation of their symptoms.

As a service provider it is our job to evaluate the situation and respect the tenant’s preferences regarding community involvement. In a scattered site setting, providers find that they need to use more innovative techniques and ask a series of questions to evaluate what is happening with a person who does not want to leave their house or interact with their neighbors. When someone is living in scattered site housing, we do not have staff on site 24/7.

By asking questions, being observant and doing some investigative work, we can establish whether or not the behavior that we are questioning differs qualitatively and quantitatively from previous behavior. We can create a behavioral baseline and get to know the person better without making as many assumptions and respect individual differences.

**When Does Engagement Start**

Engagement and relationship building begins from the first time that we meet a prospective tenant. They don’t have to be formal, scheduled activities. Every time we encounter and interact with someone, we are engaging that person even if only for a few minutes. Conversations can be about the weather or medications, but they still require some interaction. These brief encounters, combined with the receipt of tangible goods and services, will hopefully develop into a trusting and beneficial relationship.

At the initial intake, we set the stage for engagement by asking these questions about a person’s housing goals:

- Does the prospective tenant want a place that provides friendship
- Does he only want a safe and clean place to sleep
- Will the person find housing independently
- Will she need assistance to find housing
- What skills does he feel he needs to be housed successfully
- What barriers to success exist
- What internal and external resources will she need to use
- How does she presently utilize community resources

By asking these kinds of questions, we send the message that we will not make any assumptions about what the person wants or needs; we need them to tell us. Shifting decision making to the prospective tenants builds trust and communicates that we are working in partnership. Engagement builds from a basis of trust.
What does Tenant Engagement Look Like in a Scattered Site Setting

Underlying themes to services provision in scattered site housing are:

- Service provision is done at the house where the person lives
- Service provision is usually not done in an office
- Services and training are based on real life situations
- Services are provided from a strength based (what the tenant can do) rather than from a deficit (what the tenant cannot do) basis
- Supports are not time limited and are provided for as long as necessary.
- Services are client directed
- Service provision designed using an Empowerment Model-the tenant is given as much responsibility for his/her actions as is possible.

The basic structure of the housing determines, in part, how engagement will be done.

Single units that are scattered over a wide geographic area offer few opportunities for an individual to receive support from a readily accessible group of peers. Such widely scattered housing would fit the needs of someone who is more independent and more comfortable accessing services on her own.

Units that are clustered in close proximity either in a single complex or geographically close together provide support that is more immediately available either on site or close by.

In both cases on site clinical support is not available with the same frequency as in a congregate setting and providers state a heightened risk of tenant isolation and problems with landlords.

Ultimately, the providers state, they develop a partnership with the prospective tenant. Although as service providers, they have clinical training and are always aware of clinical issues, the service providers choose to downplay their role as a “clinician” who has historically made decisions for their clients. They switch to a relationship where the tenant is in control of the decision making process where he is allowed to make mistakes. One provider called this mode of operating, “The Golden Rule”, that is treat the tenant as you yourself would want to be treated or would want a family member to be treated and respect a person’s needs, desires and boundaries.

III. Some Guidelines for Engagement in Scattered Site Housing

These checklists are designed to provide some guidance for scattered-site housing developers. Although these lists are not comprehensive, they suggest some of the questions and challenges to keep in mind during the planning and development process.

Development and siting issues

- Cluster apartments in a close defined geographical area and have a central, agency-controlled, meeting space for group activities.
- Situate apartments close to parks or libraries and transportation sources.
• If developing a home where a group of people will reside, have 2 or 4 people live together. Odd numbers of people living together can lead to a situation where a person is outnumbered when the group makes decisions or always feels left out. While an individual might feel outnumbered in a group of 4, the ability to form changing teams works against an “odd man out” scenario.

• Limit households to no more than 4 people. It can be difficult to find more than 4 people who are compatible and this would create barriers to renting to capacity.

• Pay attention to the “personality” of a house, especially when integrating new people into the home. Each household takes on a different look depending on the people who live there—their daily schedules, their expectations regarding the involvement of housemates in house activities, mutual interests and needs. Providers need to be aware of these differences before a new person moves in so that the needs and personality of the individual tenant matches the needs and personality of the household. Not paying attention to these differences can lead to arguments and other problems in the house. At intake providers begin asking questions to determine the lifestyle and preferences of the tenant. At the same time providers describe the different types of housing they have to offer and begin to match these with the expressed preferences of the person who is looking for housing. For example:
  • Some houses operate like communes where the expectation is for housemates to participate in house activities both internally and externally.
  • Some houses operate like apartment houses where tenants are relatively uninvolved with their housemates and their primary social network is outside of the house.

Maximizing Use of Community Resources

• Know the locations of local libraries, recreation centers, drop-in centers, employment and day programs, local community colleges and volunteer opportunities.

• Know the local transportation routes and have maps available.

• Know the location of local health providers and know how to access them.

• Have a notebook or other central information source that lists all the phone numbers and addresses for these resources and have this available for each tenant on move-in.

• Give each tenant at move in a booklet describing agency and local resources.

• Distribute food and/or apartment goods such as pots and pans, paper goods, or clothing at move in to help tenants meet their basic needs.

• Distribute furnishings such as linens, furniture at move-in if the need is expressed.

• Provide immediate referrals, when requested, to specific services such as health care and employment.

Using activities to foster engagement

• Develop close working relationships with the property manager who can instruct the tenant in concrete apartment maintenance issues rather than having a clinical person do this. Skills training in this area could include: cleaning the apartment, trash management or recognizing repair needs.

• Sponsor a series of trainings offered by outside specialists on small repairs, etc.

• Sponsor house meetings at the local library or park to help people become familiar with community resources.
• Either develop or sponsor peer-to-peer speaker programs to discuss topics such as symptom management, advocacy, etc. (In a scattered site setting, identifying leaders might be more difficult than in a congregate setting. Some providers find it is easier to develop relationships with existing peer programs.)
• Host a brunch at the house or apartment. Tenants plan, shop and cook for the event with staff assistance as necessary and invite tenants from other housing including neighbors. Tenants can also coordinate transportation if some people own cars. Meals can then be hosted at other houses on a rotating basis.
• Be a presence at the house or apartment-make visits, scheduled or unscheduled. If a tenant rebuffs your visits, send a written note, make an invitation to go out for coffee, leave something by the apartment door for the person. Over time, a series of short conversations can turn into longer ones.

**Family Housing**
While families can benefit from all the engagement strategies listed above, they have unique needs and challenges that need to be kept in mind,

• Find apartments or homes close to schools, day care, playgrounds and health services.
• Host pre-natal, infant care and parenting classes.
• Help families with the education needs of their children. Provide names of tutoring programs, education advocates and other school-help programs.
• Co-sponsor activities with a local youth activities provider.
• Host an event for the adults and provide childcare and activities for the children.

IV. **Crisis Management**

We have included crisis and emergency management in this engagement material not only because crises and emergencies are a normal part of human experience but also because by helping people with their personal emergencies, staff can strengthen the relationship that they have with individuals. Trust between the tenant and worker can be enhanced when meeting the basic and immediate needs that occur as a result of a crisis situation.

Whether we lose our job, a loved one passes away, or we fight with our family or neighbors, crises and emergencies will occur and having a plan to manage them is a vital component of the housing program.

Providers need to have a plan in place before tenants move in about how to deal with emergencies. Advance planning requires that case workers talk with tenants while they are healthy and have them plan on what actions they want a designated person or agency to take in a crisis situation when they might not be in control.

Advance planning is even more important in a scattered site environment. Agencies do not have the same access to apartment or emergency supports that they have in a congregate setting. (However, if you are unable to gain access to a house or apartment and have determined that a person is potentially a harm to himself, then the landlord, service provider or emergency personnel can enter.)
Emergencies brought on by stressors in our lives can include:
- An exacerbation of psychiatric symptoms
- Health problems
- Damaging substance abuse behaviors and
- Threat of eviction.

Crisis management systems can have these ingredients:
- Twenty four hour telephone response systems such as
  - Pager/beeper duty that rotates among staff/senior administrators to
  - Voicemail/switchboard prompts or
  - Toll-free numbers designed to lend tenants direction in case of emergencies.

If a 24/7 crisis response system is not in place, it becomes especially important to forge reliable, collaborative relationships with area providers (in some cases using Memorandums of Understanding) such as mobile crisis response teams or community liaisons to local police departments. Staff operating maximally as a 'team' are particularly savvy in managing and relaying information, and thus are especially well equipped to respond to crises. Though there typically is lead case managers assigned to tenant caseloads, any member of the 'team' is typically prepared to respond to crises.

Communication between property managers and service providers is always important. It becomes especially important in scattered site housing when service providers are not always on site and do not have the same access to a tenant's apartment that a property manager might have.

When communication between service provider and property manager is open and constructive, the property manager will more likely contact the service provider when he notices a change in a tenant’s behavior and make the contact before situations get out of control.


CSH Tenant Outreach and Engagement ppt

CSH Handout on Strategies – Tools to Engage Tenants