

Making Housing a Reality
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Yesterday, we had the opportunity to hear Tilly Brasch, a board member from Stepping Stone Clubhouse in Australia, tell us about her son, Riley. After several years of ineffective and uncaring treatment, Riley found the Stepping Stone Clubhouse in Australia. He found solace there and began to thrive. After a hospitalization, without communication, Riley was placed into a boarding home hours away from his Clubhouse. It was there that he died by taking his own life.

As a mother, I was overwhelmed by Tilly's strength to tell us about Riley. If she can have the courage to share her story, then we must have the courage to make changes in our Clubhouses – especially in the way that we think about where our members and the quality of their homes.

Before coming to this conference, I thought that only the United States had a problem with housing for our members. Then I heard a member from a Clubhouse in Finland talk about having an apartment, but feeling so tired as she struggled with cleaning and shopping that her apartment became a difficult and confusing place to her. I heard a member from England talk about the poor housing conditions there. A member from Australia expressed how difficult it was to apply for a job when one did not have an address. A man from Utah talked about being homeless and how disorganized his life had become. A woman who had been homeless in Washington State told me she washed her clothes in the river and thought she was of no use to anyone, any way. All of them talked about how the Clubhouse, and an opportunity to have their own home with Clubhouse support, had saved their lives.

Now, to change the subject, I have a confession to make. I watch Reality Shows!

Many of you probably do not watch these shows. Certainly there are no such shows in countries outside of the United States. In order to understand what a reality show is, I shall first define the word reality. Reality means “the state of being a fact, a success, or the state of being permanent”. Reality means “not being an illusion”. Remember the following words: permanent, successful, not an illusion.

I looked in the Internet dictionary and a new definition of the word describes reality as being an adverb to modify a TV show. Most Reality Shows are about a group of adults who come from different backgrounds and have to live together for a while. The entertainment for the viewers is to watch the stress these residents encounter as they try to live together.

When colleagues come for training at Gateway House and stay at our guest house, they say, “This is like the reality show, the “Real World.” “The Real World” was the very first reality show and was produced on MTV in 1992. Some colleagues feel as if they are on

“Survivor.” For sure, these colleagues are being an “Apprentice” in the Clubhouse they are visiting. I remind them that colleagues have been staying together in guest houses since the late 1970’s, fifteen years before TV got the idea. The Clubhouse community is and will always be the forerunner for successful ideas. I often wonder if a colleague came for training and stayed at the Fountain House guest house, then quit, and went to work for a Television network and started the idea of these reality shows.

Almost everyone here today in this audience has either participated in colleague training and stayed in a guest house, or had roommates in college, or shared a hotel room with Clubhouse colleagues you don’t know that well.

After a few days in the guest house – or in the hotel room - does it get stressful? Does your roommate snore? Does your roommate keep the TV on ballgames that last way into the night, and you want to sleep? Is sharing a bathroom stressful?

After a while, you start longing for home, with peace and quiet, your favorite TV show, to turn off when you want to, your own refrigerator, your own private bathroom.

Suppose this manner of living became a reality for you. Suppose it was a permanent living situation, your only option. For many members, this situation is not a reality show where participants can go *home* at the end of the television series. They cannot go back to their own private space when the training group is over. This is their housing facility, their community care bed.

Over the past decades our Clubhouse community has made remarkable strides in offering employment opportunities to our members. We have overcome the excuses: all “ten excuses” that Margaret Beard spoke of in a plenary address at a Seminar many years ago. We have overcome economic situations, high unemployment rates, unions, lack of entitlement incentives, and lack of staff. We are meeting exemplary goals of providing job placements to our members.

If you have a certified Clubhouse, you can proudly respond to any member’s desire to go to work with a real job opportunity. A member comes into the Clubhouse and says, “I want to go to work”, and we say, “Yes!”

In recent years we have made much progress in offering educational opportunities. Education was moved from the “Functions of the House” category in the Standards and given its own separate category, in bold capital letters. Now, when a member comes to us and asks for help in returning to school, we say, “Yes, we can help you.”

Likewise, if a member wants something meaningful to do during the day, we say, “Yes”.

If a member needs friends, or a social life, we say “Yes!”

But, when a member comes to the Clubhouse and says, “I need a place to live,” can we say “yes” as easily as we can for the other opportunities we offer?

If a member says, “I am so unhappy where I live,” do we simply refer him or her to another agency?

When we look at a member and see the look of hopelessness and sadness that results from low self esteem because she lives in an oppressive, authoritative, restrictive environment, and she so wants her own apartment, do we too often simply express our regret that we aren’t able to help?

We can get a member a job; we can help him or her find full time employment, we can help him or her establish a career. And yet, if that member has to go home at night and feel unsafe, or unhappy, or be treated with a lack of dignity, how often do we stop short of truly helping this member move forward with his or her life?

We take pride in the fact that we have helped a member return to school. But does he or she have a dignified home to invite a fellow student over to work on a school project? Can there be a study group in the member’s home? Does the member have to leave early from a study group because he has a curfew, because he lives in a place that tells him when to leave and when to come back? Or is this student, our member, embarrassed to invite a classmate home because he lives in a group setting or still lives at home with caring parents and he is in his 40’s or 50’s?

Loving parents are wonderful, and if one is lucky to have a supportive family. But most adults move on and live on their own. Relationships with family members can be strained, and self esteem can be affected when grown adults must live with parents or children. Adults should not have to live with their parents because there is no other choice.

“Wellness” is an important topic in Clubhouses these days. But one of the most critically important aspects of our health and wellness is a good night’s sleep. Do we think about where our members are sleeping at night, and are they offered the opportunity for a good night’s sleep?

My favorite Clubhouse documentary was made in 1966. In those early documentaries of the Clubhouse, the basic opportunities were stressed: employment, meaningful work, education, social opportunities and independent, apartment living. How did we slip away from this last but most important opportunity, this responsibility of our Clubhouses?

We need to give our full attention to our responsibility to offer permanent, independent living to members who desire this opportunity. We need to help members buy their own home or condominium. We need to offer the support they need and stop relying on the auspice agency or their case manager.

Let us stop making excuses...”high rents”, “lack of money”, “housing is different”, “this is hard”, “not in my neighborhood.”

Let us give Housing a separate category in the Standards, in bold, capital letters, to shine a light on how important it is in the work of recovery from mental illness. We must develop safe, decent, affordable, independent, and permanent housing for our members.

We had a colleague from Europe visiting Gateway House. As part of the training experience, she toured our apartment program. Having a little difficulty with translation, she stated, "I am impressed with your "Homing Program." After we all chuckled, we realized that we have seventy-two homes to offer our members. We do not have "housing" but "homes." We do not have seventy-two beds. Let's stop saying how many "beds" we have. "Beds" are in hospitals. Homes are places that we call our own, and where we live in our communities.

Many Clubhouses are providing good homes in the form of independent apartment living to their members. Clubhouses are helping members live in their own homes in high rent districts, in rural areas, in suburbs, and in countries outside of the United States.

These Clubhouses have shown that with good Clubhouse support, most members can live independently and enjoy a dignified life.

We built up our employment opportunities with one job, and with one member at a time. If we must, let us build up independent living opportunities to our members with one home at a time.

We must make independent living **permanent** so that members do not fear having to move because they get better.

We must provide this opportunity the **Clubhouse way**, and then we know we *will* be **successful**.

We *can* do this, and when we do, a nice home will no longer be an illusion. It will be a REALITY.