

Best Practices in Supportive Housing Property Management

The following best practices emerged from a 2009 national survey of successful managers of supportive housing. The survey, prepared by VIVA Consulting and jointly sponsored by REDF, Enterprise Community Partners and the Corporation for Supportive Housing, involved a written survey and interviews with 13 successful managers of supportive housing from around the country.

1. Finance for success

Supportive housing provides housing and services for people with special needs, including the formerly homeless and people with histories of severe substance abuse or mental illness. This housing typically involves a greater level of staffing and supervision than affordable housing aimed at the general population, as well as higher turnover, at the same time as it serves the very lowest-income individuals least able to pay substantial rents. The most successful supportive housing properties are financed with these factors in mind, with financial structures characterized by:

- Project-based rent subsidies;
- Supportive services funding from sources other than rents; and
- Minimal or non-existent mortgage debt.

2. Prioritize a safe and stable environment

For residents whose lives have generally been characterized by turmoil and instability, a safe, stable and predictable environment is critical. All successful operators describe very clearly-defined, and universally enforced, policies and procedures, as well as rules for guests, particularly regarding building entry.

Larger properties and properties in urban environments find front desk coverage or security staff, full-time or close to full-time, essential for preserving the safety and security residents need. For most properties, this function requires roughly 4.0 full-time equivalent employees. It is important that properties are of sufficient scale to cover this cost – it is much easier for an 85-unit property to pay for 24/7 front desk coverage than for a property with 40 or 50 units.

3. Find site staff who can successfully interact with residents, and provide them with training and central office support

Managers of supportive housing often find that they are most successful when they hire site-based staff with the commitment to mission, empathy and social skills necessary to interact with the residents (as opposed to screening for other kinds of technical property management experience). These firms then design their staffing to complement the interaction-oriented skills of their site-based staff, centralizing more technical functions, like compliance or maintenance management. Successful supportive housing managers report a strong commitment to staff training, consistent with their emphasis on clearly-defined and enforced policies, procedures and rules.

4. Establish clear roles for property management and resident services, and processes for their structured and frequent interaction

Successful operators of supportive housing pay close attention to the interaction between property management and resident services. They recognize that the goals of these two functions are not always perfectly aligned; striving to create a “comfortable tension,” they develop clear processes for addressing conflicts when they occur. Successful practices include:

- Separate reporting and office space for the two functions
- Regular (often weekly), structured meetings and communications
- Clearly articulated goals and processes for working together, often memorialized in a formal agreement or memorandum of understanding
- Shared goals for occupancy, financial performance and resident success

5. Resident employment

- a. Works when it is clearly aligned with the organization’s mission, when it’s a central focus of the mission
- b. Residents don’t live and work in the same property
- c. Resident employees require consistent support and supervision
- d. Clear rule enforcement w/ resident employees as with others (rent payment, building entry)

REDF, www.redf.org

Corporation for Supportive Housing, www.csh.org

Enterprise Community Partners, www.enterprisecommunity.org

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