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The Choice Between a "Real Home" and a Program

by Michael Kendrick PhD

One of the challenges agencies face when they provide housing for people with disabilities is how to create a true home for the people who live there. Too often, unless there are proper safeguards in place, there is a danger that even the most well-intended homes can become a "facility" rather than a "real home."

To foster a true sense of home, we should think of the features we all strive to instill in our own homes. These qualities vary but they are based on a rich cultural heritage that underlies the true concept of a "real" home. These features may include a place where we can be ourselves and feel comfortable, a place that expresses our personality, a place we choose that has a sense of family, intimacy and privacy, a place to contain our personal relationship and social life;-a place of our own where we can feel safe and secure. While some may emphasize one feature over another, these attributes are all within the range of what most people would consider essential for a home and home life.

Turning a facility into a home can only occur if staff and the agency are committed to maximizing the idea of "home" as a priority in residential services. Agencies should believe that the needs of disabled persons are largely the same as other people. The primary reason for residential settings should be that they are the home of those served, rather than a setting for treatment, programming, or any other professional activity. When professional services are needed they should be offered in such a way that the integrity and normalcy of the home is not compromised. The list accompanying this article offers some points people should consider when they create homes for consumers.

Management, staff, consumers, and families, and guardians should search for their own strategies that stress the importance of a real home. This is an ongoing process where the DMR, consumers, families and provider agencies need to consistently reassess our initiatives and established programs to guarantee that the proper home environments permeate our residential programs.

Making a House a Home

- The following are points for consumers, families and staff to consider as they strive towards building a proper and rich sense of "home" into their residences.
- The residents served should assist in the selection and location of the home.
- They should help to decorate and furnish their home environment.

- They should decide who they want to live with.
- They should have a voice in staff selection.
- Agencies should hire staff whose personal orientation, commitment, and attributes are targeted towards helping people make a home for themselves.
- Programming, treatment, and related practices are either kept out of the home setting, or if necessary blended carefully into the home-life so they do not disturb the home setting.
- Agencies should not bring their bureaucracy into the home. This means agency materials, meetings, offices, or equipment.
- Home sites should be integrated into their neighborhoods. The houses should be attractive, well cared for, and similar in appearance to neighboring households.
- The home should be close to work, family, recreation and convenient to other interests of the people who live there.
- Intimacy, sharing, personal ownership and possessions should be encouraged.
- Regulatory concerns of funding agencies should be addressed in such a way that the home remains a home.
- The house is at all times, legally and otherwise the home of the residents, and not the staff or the agency.
- The agency should stress in its mission, and in its communication to staff, consumers and families that the concept of home in its residences is a worthy and preeminent goal of the organization.

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