

A place to call home, a place to recover

An agency's supported housing approach garners national recognition **BY NELSON BURNS AND JULIA STEINBERG**

Nearly one-third of homeless people suffer from a mental illness, according to SAMHSA's Center for Mental Health Services. Research has shown that the majority of homeless people with a mental illness lack access to supportive services, such as housing programs and counseling centers. Yet the National Mental Health Association has found that supported housing is an effective option for communities working to meet the needs of people with mental health disorders who are homeless and trying to become productive members of society.

At Coleman Professional Services, a private, nonprofit behavioral health provider in Kent, Ohio, we recognize the benefits of supported housing programs. In fact, our efforts won us Eli Lilly and Company's 2005 Reintegration Award in the Home Sweet Home category for our housing program. In this article, we describe our housing program and how we are helping homeless people with mental illness get off the streets and into treatment.

Housing Resources

Our goal for clinical and residential services is to proactively create a seamless system of care focused on best practices and risk management. Coleman concentrates on recovery and an individual's ability to work, and continuously implements policy improvements to maintain our priorities in those areas.

In 1993, Coleman's operations services, a unit of Coleman that works hand in glove with the behavioral health staff to coordinate care for adults with chronic mental illnesses, began to handle the growth of

Coleman's housing resources. Operations services handles the Coleman-owned rental properties for independent living clients in our residential program. The properties are available for rent to individuals who have a history of, or are currently recovering from, a severe and persistent mental illness. Priority is given to individuals who are homeless, recently hospitalized or discharged from a hospital's crisis unit, or at risk of homelessness. People with a history of evictions and landlord complaints also are targeted.

Approximately 50% of the consumers living in these homes have a history of drug and/or alcohol abuse. Some individuals have a dual diagnosis of mental illness and mental retardation. Approximately 10% of tenants have a physical disability.

In addition to the 48 independent apartment living sites, Coleman's residential services owns and operates 3 supported living sites and 2 group homes serving approximately 105 individuals on a yearly basis. The residential program has two parts: residential treatment and supported group living.

The residential treatment program has two seven-bed group homes for adults with behavioral problems, severe mental disabilities, and co-occurring disorders who are striving toward integrating back into the community. The homes are designed to maximize the individual's ability to live in the least restrictive environment, attain and maintain independent living in the community, and minimize hospitalization. The goal is to provide them with the ability to continue to learn, grow, and lead productive lives in their community. Staff is present 24/7.

The supported group living program includes three congregate living homes designed to provide residents with more independence while having the support of a Coleman staff member at all times. These homes also include additional on-site support by case managers. The supportive group living homes' goal is to provide the least restrictive environment for residents while attaining and maintaining independent living in the community.

Alarm systems are in place at our Crisis Residential Treatment location for employees in case of an emergency with a client. Employees wear alarms at all times. Emergency signals are received by a local fire department and EMS, as well as Coleman's Emergency Prescreening and 24-Hour Crisis Intervention Services. It's worth noting that 95% of residents say they feel safe in their living environment and that staff are reliable.

Treatment and Service Philosophy

Case managers are an integral part of the program. They work with each tenant to help him/her develop an individualized client service plan. The plans are consumer-generated, goal-oriented, and based on the individual's strengths, needs, and desires. Our focus on recovery and an individual's ability to work is always at the forefront.

Client service plans are one of the keys to our seamless system of care. The plans include all services the tenant needs, which are provided both within and outside Coleman Professional Services. Case managers review plans every 90 days, and plans are revised as the tenant's needs change.

Residents work with case managers on individual housing plans throughout their entire stay, as the program is targeted to help individuals eventually transition back into society. However, residents stay in Coleman's housing program until their goals are met, regardless of the length of time.

We also use an effective orientation guide that the Ohio Department of Development (ODOD) has recognized. This guide is designed to integrate people with special needs into the community, specifically those who have never lived independently. It is divided into five sections that discuss common issues new tenants face when moving into independent living, such as safety, fair housing,

consumers' rights and responsibilities, apartment standards, and neighbor relations. (This guide is available at nonprofit and for-profit rates. E-mail tammy.weaver@colemanprof.com.)

Other Services

Our entrepreneurial enterprises offer life-improving opportunities to consumers. Coleman Employment Services offers traditional vocational, rehabilitation, and employment services to people with disabilities. Coleman Document Services (formerly Sage Computer Services) provides computer skills training classes, as well as the opportunity for people with disabilities to gain employment. Through our vast range of services, residents of the supported housing program have access to counseling, education, peer support, and employment opportunities, which allow them to reintegrate and become contributing members of society.

Outcomes

We have had many positive outcomes through our services. For example, 15 individuals in a program receiving ODOD funding through Coleman have gone from homelessness to housing, and 10 have begun working or volunteering. The other 5 are working with a housing counselor to find employment or volunteer opportunities. All of the eight current individuals in the Evergreen Apartments (residential treatment) and 78% of the 18 people living in the Franklin/Mantua Apartments (residential treatment) maintained their housing for at least one year. We have reduced hospital bed

days for clients from 6,882 days in FY 1990 to 1,592 days in FY 2005 (even as the number of people served increased by 6%). Our success has enabled clients to remain out of community corrections and emergency rooms. Over the years, we have built a structure within the community that provides emergency services and access, enabling quicker recovery and specialized care for this population.

Lessons Learned

In our experience with housing people with mental illness, we have learned several lessons other providers might find useful:

Always have a plan. Coleman continues to have a residential plan on how we hope to serve people in the future. This plan deals with client needs, gaps in service, collaboration with other community organizations, and capital needs.

Follow what is right, even if it is not the popular thing to do. When we started the housing developments, neighbors and some politicians were very rough on our housing proposals. Threats were made on the CEO, our organization, and future grant applications. We stayed true to our beliefs that people with disabilities should be integrated into our community. We stuck with our goals and our principles even though those were very scary times.

Don't let money dictate your program's direction. Work your plan, sell your story—your results will come. If you wait for money to drop at your door, it will never come.

Leaders surround themselves with good people. Coleman educates employees. By effectively educating our employees, Coleman empowers its employees. We follow authors such as Stephen Covey and Jim Collins who support careful selection to place the right people "on the bus."

Recognition

Samuel Jones, a current resident of the independent apartments (residential treatment), speaks highly of his experience with Coleman's housing program. "When I came to Coleman Professional Services, I was in need of housing. I was homeless with nowhere to turn," Jones says. "Since becoming

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a client, I have affordable housing, a place to call home, and a lot of dignity."

Since his treatment and residence began, Jones has earned a bachelor's degree in education from Kent State University and is currently serving as a substitute teacher in two local school systems. Jones has been living in Coleman's independent apartments for eight years; however, he recently became engaged, and he and his fiancée are planning on moving into an apartment together in the near future. Jones and Paulla Gates, the senior clinical officer who oversees all of the company's housing, attended the Eli Lilly Reintegration Awards' ceremony in November.

Coleman's grant writer, Andrea Calo, says the staff is proud of the award. "Often it's difficult for the team that deals with these clients to see how much impact these lives might have," she says. "This type of an award vindicates just how great their impact is."

Coleman also has been recognized by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) as being a leader in the field of housing development and operations for people with mental illness. Coleman is one of four organizations chosen by HUD to be studied on best practices for provision of services to rural homeless populations.

Conclusion

The task of bettering the lives of people who struggle with mental illness is not an easy feat. However, as Coleman has found, providing consumers with access to the same opportunities as the rest of the population, especially supported housing, can be a successful step in the right direction. We believe our success comes from our ability to identify the needs within the community and organization and create plans to address these needs. ■

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