

A Research Note:

SOBER HOUSING: THE OXFORD HOUSE APPROACH

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Abstract

Oxford Houses provide positive, structured residences for persons recovering from substance abuse. These "sober houses" are administered democratically by the residents in accordance with nine traditions that embody the rules and objectives of the Oxford House concept. Each residence is required to be self-sufficient and financially responsible. Residents must obey all house rules, stay sober, and must pay rent on a weekly basis. The success of Oxford Houses influenced enactment of the Anti-Drug-Abuse Act of 1988 which provided a revolving loan fund for establishing group homes for recovering substance abusers. Two case studies are presented showing how Oxford Houses overcame the obstacles that most commonly impede such programs: lack of funds, zoning restrictions, and neighborhood resistance.

Introduction

Sober housing is critical to the long-term rehabilitation of men and women recovering from substance abuse (Wittman, 1987). A safe place to live that is alcohol- and drug-free is not only part of recovery, but it also may be the most important service provided (McCarty, 1989). Sober housing is particularly critical for homeless men and women who exhibit greater service needs and possess fewer resources to aid in their recovery (Schutt and Garrett, 1990; Fischer, 1988; Breakey, 1987). As of June 1991, there were 256 Oxford houses in 27 states and the District of Columbia.

Development of residential facilities for recovering substance abusers, however, is not an easy task. Lack of funds, zoning restrictions, and neighborhood resistance often doom housing development efforts to failure.

The Oxford House approach to establishing sober residences utilizes a methodology that effectively responds to these three major obstacles. This paper briefly describes the Oxford House concept and presents case studies of the development of the first two Oxford Houses in Massachusetts.

Origins

The first Oxford House was opened in Silver Spring, Maryland in October, 1975 by a group of recovering alcoholics who had been living in a halfway house supported by county government. Faced with the imminent closure of the house due to a funding cut-back, the men approached the owner of the building to determine if there was any way to avoid eviction. The owner, a member of Alcoholics Anonymous, suggested that the men lease the house themselves. After considerable discussion, the men developed an organizational plan based on the principles of self-help (Molloy, 1990).

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The Program

Operations

Oxford Houses are independent and democratically run. Each resident has one vote and a majority rules except in the case of accepting a new member in which 80 percent of the current membership must vote its approval. The men or women live together much as family members, fraternity brothers, or sorority sisters do in congregate shared living quarters. Oxford Houses subscribe to nine traditions that guide their operation (Molloy, 1990).

Tradition one. Oxford House has as its primary goal the provision of housing and rehabilitative support for the alcoholic/addict who wants to stop drinking/drugging and stay stopped.

Tradition two. All Oxford Houses are run on a democratic basis with officers (usually a president, treasurer, and secretary) serving continuous periods of no longer than six months in any one office.

Tradition three. The only members who will ever be asked to leave an Oxford House are those who return to drinking, drugging, or exhibit disruptive behavior--which includes nonpayment of rent. A majority vote of residents is required to expel another resident.

Tradition four. Oxford House is not affiliated with Alcoholics Anonymous, organizationally or financially. Oxford House does acknowledge, support, and utilize Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) traditions, although residents are not required to attend AA meetings.

Tradition five. Each Oxford House is autonomous except in matters affecting the institution as a whole. Each Oxford House is self-supporting and self-run. The Oxford House charter, however, requires adherence to three basic principles: 1) no drinking or drugging, 2) the house must be democratically operated, and 3) the house must obey the law and pay its bills.

Tradition six. Each Oxford House must be financially self-supporting. Nonetheless, financially secure houses may, with approval or encouragement from headquarters, provide a loan to new or financially needy houses for a term not to exceed one year.

Tradition seven. Oxford Houses are nonprofessional, although individuals may be encouraged to utilize outside professionals whenever such utilization is likely to enhance recovery.

Tradition eight. Propagation of the Oxford House, Inc. concept should always be conceived as public education rather than promotion. Individuals should be wary of placing their own personalities before the principles that make Oxford House work.

Tradition nine. Members who leave Oxford House in good standing are encouraged to become associate members and offer support, friendship, and function as an example to newer members.

Operational Obstacles

Zoning restrictions. Oxford Houses are generally large, single-family dwellings located in residential neighborhoods. Houses are leased, not purchased. Leasing reduces the capital needed and reduces the time from site selection to occupancy and operation. Because the houses do not provide treatment, operate for profit, or function as a rooming house, there is usually no violation of local zoning ordinances. No Oxford House has been closed due to zoning violations or conflicts.

Support for siting residences like Oxford Houses appears to be available in the Fair Housing Act Amendments of 1988, which took effect in March, 1989:

Under the Act, many government-imposed restrictions on the ability to open group homes or other housing for people with disabilities, including those contained in state laws and local ordinances, will be a violation of Federal law (Mental Health Law Project, 1988, p. 2).

Neighborhood resistance. Oxford Houses are designed to be "good neighbors in good neighborhoods" (Molloy, 1990). The experience of Oxford House has been that, over time, neighbors appreciate the existence of an Oxford House in their neighborhood. The two basic reasons for this acceptance are: 1) appreciation of the strictly enforced policy of no drinking or drugging, and 2) upkeep of the property by the Oxford House residents.

Landlords are also pleased to lease to Oxford House residents. Large suburban houses that are too costly for a small nuclear family are eagerly sought as Oxford Houses. Landlords sometimes charge slightly higher rents because there are more occupants contributing to the rental payment, but rents are never exorbitant. Finally, landlords know that the rent will always be paid. Residents are not allowed to remain if they do not pay rent. There is usually a waiting list of prospective residents and there is little "downtime" in filling vacancies.

Funding. In the past, Oxford Houses have been started with funds and assistance from other Oxford Houses. This was the approach used for the establishment of 27 Oxford Houses in Washington, DC and in Pennsylvania. However, Oxford Houses can be funded by any means. The first two Oxford Houses in Massachusetts were started using small personal loans.

Under the Anti-Drug-Abuse Act of 1988, a revolving loan fund has been authorized for the purpose of establishing "group homes for recovering substance abusers." The Act establishes a \$100,000 fund in each state for this purpose. Loans of up to \$4,000 are made to nonprofit, private entities to provide housing for four or more recovering individuals who want to rent a house or use other housing as a self-supported and self-run alcohol- and drug-free recovery program (Federal Register, 1989). Borrowers have up to two years to repay the loan.

Although Oxford Houses are not directly mentioned in the legislation, the founders of Oxford House, Inc. were a moving force behind its enactment. Hence, the Oxford House approach is the blueprint for the legislation (Congressional Record, 1988). Using the maximum loan amount of \$4,000 and the total set-aside of \$5,000,000, it is possible that 1,250 Oxford-style group homes could be established in the first year of loan operation.

Case Studies

The following two case histories of Oxford Houses established in Massachusetts describe in practical terms the operation of this concept. These examples also demonstrate the potential benefit to each community of an Oxford House when the residents are committed to the success of the program.

Malden I

The inability to locate a halfway house for a soon-to-be-paroled inmate was the impetus for development of the first Oxford House in Massachusetts. The inmate and his lawyer, frustrated in their efforts, learned of the Oxford House concept while talking with a halfway house director. A telephone call to Oxford House Inc. in Maryland provided the encouragement and direction to begin the process of establishing a house.

Newspapers were reviewed for large houses and numerous realtors were called. A house with the requisite qualities was located in Malden, a suburb north of Boston. The owner had friends in recovery and was familiar with Alcoholics Anonymous. The house, which had a living room, den, dining room, large kitchen, and half bath on the first floor, plus four bedrooms and a full bath on the second floor, was ideal. By placing two beds in each bedroom, a total of eight men could be housed comfortably. The owner was very accommodating, leaving the refrigerator, washer and dryer, and other furniture in the house. Other needed furniture was donated by recovering alcoholics, merchants, and state agencies. Within three weeks of first learning of the Oxford House concept, the inmate and his lawyer had located a house and had ascertained a one-year lease.

Recruitment of additional residents was carried out by mailing information about Malden I to treatment centers and halfway houses in the area. Eventually, calls began to come in and the initial members of the house began interviewing applicants for the remaining beds. As the interviews were conducted, the two criteria for acceptance that emerged centered on need and the likelihood that the individual would make a positive contribution to the house. The residents agree that these interviews are the most difficult thing they have to do in the house.

Tellingly, as word about Malden I reached the AA and Narcotics Anonymous community, there were many more applicants for residency than beds. Currently, it is not unusual for 4 to 6 men to be interviewed whenever there is a vacancy. Since the Oxford House philosophy calls for development of additional houses when the demand for residency exceeds the supply of available beds, a third Oxford House was opened in Medford, an adjacent city, on April 1, 1990.

Rent at Malden I was originally set at \$65 per week. After several months the residents voted an increase to \$70 per week to ensure a safe operating reserve. Repayment of the personal loan used in the start-up funding was factored into the weekly rent.

Most of the original residents did well, but some did not. An early victim was the founding parolee who lapsed and was asked to leave. After some initial growing pains and a few crises, the house stabilized, thanks in large part to the commitment and hard work of the first house president. Within two months, the house was full and running fairly smoothly. But life in an Oxford House, like sobriety among alcoholics, is not without problems. By placing principles above personalities and with constructive interaction at weekly house meetings, however, the residents were able to deal with problems in a positive way. Like other Oxford Houses across the country, Malden I is truly a home where recovering individuals can feel comfortable and be good neighbors in good neighborhoods. The residents of Malden I, whose lease was just renewed for another year, were paid a high compliment by their landlady when she said after visiting the house, "It looks better now than when I lived here."

Malden II

Malden II was born out of necessity. The Stabilization Services Project, a three-year Community Demonstration Project funded by the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, had no sober housing resource to accommodate graduates of the program. The graduates were all homeless, substance-abusing men who had achieved an average of six-months sobriety. Given the prospect of sending these men back to the streets or rooming houses, the Project Director decided that an effort would be made to establish an Oxford House.

The first step was to locate a residence. The classified ad section of a Boston newspaper proved fruitful. A newly constructed, three-bedroom home was found in a middle-income residential neighborhood in a Boston suburb. The owner was informed of the Oxford House concept and the fact that six men would be occupying the house. Although the rent agreed upon was higher than the rent advertised in the newspaper, the monthly rate per resident was below the cost of a single room in most local boarding houses.

Payment of the first and last month's rent was made possible by pooling four small personal loans obtained by four program graduates from the Renters Revolving Loan Fund, a fund established by private donations that is administered by the Travelers Aid Society of Boston. These personal loans are paid back on a monthly basis over a two-year period. Responsibility for repayment of the loan is borne by all residents of the house during their stay. The individual rent per week is \$80. Collectively, this amount covers the rent payment for the house, the electricity, heat, loan repayment, and provides petty cash for supplies and surplus. Rent is collected weekly and deposited in a

checking account in the name of the Oxford House. All cash disbursements are by check and require two signatures. Treasurer reports are prepared weekly and distributed to the membership at their weekly house meeting.

The house itself was furnished with donated furniture, housewares, and small appliances that were solicited from a variety of sources. Assistance from Malden I was freely given and contributed greatly to the establishment of Malden II.

After the house had been in operation for three months, the local zoning board received a written complaint that Malden II was being operated as a boarding house. The community has a particularly strict zoning ordinance that prohibits the cohabitation of more than two unrelated individuals in the same residence. The zoning board has not pursued enforcement of this ordinance to date.

Discussion and Conclusion

The strength of the Oxford House concept is its simplicity. It provides an effective and efficient approach to the development and maintenance of alcohol- and drug-free residences. The houses cost taxpayers nothing and provide a sober, secure, and homelike setting where residents can continue their recovery from substance abuse. Oxford Houses not only provide housing for recovering individuals, but also they may influence their communities. As sober houses are established we envision the development of alcohol- and drug-free neighborhoods and increased community resistance to substance abuse.

The replicability of Oxford Housing is also particularly attractive. Oxford Houses may be considered the archetype of what Wittman (1987) has called the "chain store" approach to the development of sober housing. As new knowledge and technology from pilot projects augment the proven success of Oxford House programs, these innovations will be assimilated and disseminated in a manner akin to franchising. Given the availability of start-up funds through the revolving loans provided by the 1988 Anti-Drug-Abuse Act and technical assistance from Oxford House, Inc., the franchising approach to sober housing development will likely be used widely in the 1990s.

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