

In our local reentry coalition, we have been working on a project to inventory every type of reentry-related housing program in the community. This has turned into quite a challenging project for a bunch of volunteers, but it has been very valuable so far. Here is an overview of our findings to date.

THE ‘WHY’

In several conversations among reentry leaders and practitioners in our group, it became clear that there were some housing programs in the area that were definitely questionable in their quality, ethics, etc. We quickly decided that one of the main benefits of having a large coalition is to use our influence to encourage high-quality housing programs and discourage low-quality ones. This simple idea has evolved into a number of steps, ideas, side-projects, etc.

Our main goal is to maintain an accurate directory of housing resources. We also plan to develop a series of “reentry housing quality standards” and then help the community as a whole hold the local reentry housing service providers accountable to these standards. Since we don’t have the influence to “legislate” any standards – and really don’t want to – we thought we would experiment with an approach that would *empower* the community to know what was going on and to weigh in with social opinion and influence.

FIRST STEP - CATEGORIES

Our first task was to define the exact categories or types of housing that existed in the community. Right away, we recognized that we were going to have to develop our own specific, localized definitions for each category, since different folks used the same phrase to mean different kinds of housing. For instance, a “half-way” house in our community means, specifically, a state-sanctioned housing program that the state prison system contracts with, to house offenders who are returning to the community from prison and have nowhere to live when they get out. Yet, it is very common for reentry practitioners to refer to any kind of transitional or residential reentry program as a half-way house.

We ended up, after a number of meetings and discussions, with fourteen categories. Most are *indirectly* related to reentry (“group home,” “Veterans housing program”) but really help us provide the most useful housing directory possible.

NEXT STEP – CHANGE DIRECTORY CATEGORIES

We already had a Reentry Resource Directory in place with a pre-defined set up housing categories. Because the Directory was pretty new, we did not have many housing providers in the Directory. So when we implemented the new set of categories in the Directory, it was not hard to get everyone into the proper category. (We had been holding off doing too much work on that section of the Directory, since we knew the changes were coming. Now we are going to focus a lot of attention on documenting everything thoroughly.)

ON ALLOWING THE COMMUNITY TO RATE HOUSING PROGRAMS

The Directory system that we use came with a feature that allowed members of the community to “rate” a particular organization or program in the Directory (housing or otherwise), just like *Yelp!* allows consumers to rate businesses, restaurants, etc. We are going to be very interested in seeing whether this ability to rate a “good” house or a “bad” house (from the community’s perspective) will give us any data that can be used to encourage housing programs with poor quality to either reform their ways or move somewhere else. This is a brand new feature with no feedback yet, but it will be a great social experiment as the process plays out.

ON STANDARDS

We are looking for a set of standards for quality and ethics in transitional housing that we can adapt to our local community. We have seen one or two sets that we like, but are still researching it at this time. Once we finalize them, we will publish them on our website.

Eventually, we want to be able to educate “start-up” housing programs that are part of our Coalition on how to be an effective, high-quality organization. But we also want to send a message to those programs that may be trying to operate “under the radar” so to speak: You are welcome to open a new transitional housing program in our community but we have standards of quality that we expect you to follow, and we will be watching!

ON HAVING AN UP-TO-DATE HOUSING RESOURCES DIRECTORY

Both kinds of case managers, corrections-based and community-based, spend inordinate amounts of time trying to find housing for their offenders-in-reentry and their clients. We predict that it will make a huge improvement in their efficiency by having the community come together and maintain an up-to-date housing directory in real-time, collaboratively, for **free**. Plus, our directory can be accessed by chaplains, pastors, social workers, ex-offenders and their family members. It truly is a community resource for reentry.

THE DISCLAIMER

Some grant programs, and other controlling factors, dictate the exact category of housing that a program must provide, in order to qualify. One concern that came up is that if we are publishing a public directory of categories of housing, and we are using our own localized names for the categories, to make things more customized for our community, it could cause some confusion. So we developed this disclaimer that we are going to display on our directory web-page and on any printed version of the housing directory (should there be one): “These housing categories are not ‘legal’ or technical definitions nor meant to construe any particular technical application. They are solely defined by our organization to assist us in creating our resource directory in an orderly manner. Also, note that a single housing provider can be listed in multiple categories.”

ON SHARING RESOURCE INFORMATION

The one barrier we have encountered, which we believe to be universal in reentry, is that case managers don’t like for everyone to know where a good reentry housing program is, because then it will fill up and they won’t be able to house their clients there. So people are reluctant to share, once they find a “trusted” provider. We have discussed this issue at length and have not come up with a good solution yet. We would be very interested in hearing from anyone with a working solution.

CONCLUSION

The under-lying reason for reluctance to share housing resources is because they are scarce. Another long-term benefit that we hope to realize by encouraging quality housing is that more houses will open and be kept open, because they will be managed well.

FOR MORE DETAILS, PLEASE CONTACT **SRG**

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