

**LANDLORDS AS PARTNERS FOR  
PROMOTING SUCCESS IN  
SUPPORTED HOUSING:  
"IT TAKES MORE THAN A  
LEASE AND A KEY"**

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*This paper examines the potential value of working with landlords and property managers to promote success in supported housing for people with psychiatric and addictive disabilities. The authors argue that relationships with landlords can promote tenants' housing stability, rehabilitation, social integration, and success in community living. A case history of the program is used to describe efforts to develop working relationships with landlords. It concludes by presenting a model for how tenants, housing programs, and service providers can collaborate with landlords.*

*Well, we started out as landlords and we were kind of thankful that they're giving us a check that we can depend on. But it became more than that...I coined a phrase, "it takes more than a lease and a key." (Supported housing tenants) are vulnerable to a lot of problems...Right in the very beginning, it's "Where's the bus?"... "How do you connect with the utilities?" and various things. You get them started a little bit and we found that it was rewarding. And suddenly, you find a garden... things are thriving, you know, it's automatic. You start watering it, a seed doesn't grow unless you water it, and nurture it a little bit. It's a good feeling and I feel as though we're doing things that are beneficial to us all...The (housing) program will have greater success.*

—Dwight Ottenbreit,  
Landlord Forum Participant

A growing literature has documented how people with serious and persistent psychiatric disabilities are too often separated from the communities in which they live. As Paul Carling has noted, "even when (people with psychiatric disabilities) are physically present in the community, they are kept at a social distance from other community members" (Carling, 1995, p. 251). Although over the last 35 years a great deal of work has been devoted to promoting *physical* integration for people with psychiatric disabilities, a need for greater *social* integration persists. Perhaps the most common integration strategy used in community mental health has been helping people obtain community-based housing. Typically, however, the provision of housing does not systematically address the social needs of people who have disabilities, such as fostering connections with support networks and

with an individual in ways that provide assistance or facilitate recovery although they are not employed to do so. These may include neighbors, shopkeepers, church members, or others who interact socially with individuals needing support. In the case of supported housing, people acting as natural supports are seen as potentially more responsive to tenants' social needs by virtue of being located in the settings where tenants live. Furthermore, they can help make supportive changes in the neighborhood environment and are in a better position than service providers to invite tenants to participate in community activities and organizations.

One of the main, naturally occurring relationships inherent in supported housing is that between a tenant and landlord. Paul Carling, a primary architect of current supported housing programs, has argued that working with landlords should be an essential part of any housing program (Carling, 1990, 1995). As reported by both tenants and service providers in our program, relationships with a landlord can greatly advance or hinder tenants' positive experiences with community integration. However, while most supported housing programs focus on tenants' living arrangements and supportive services, they do not clearly articulate how individuals such as landlords can act as natural supports. Furthermore, supported housing and recovery literature includes only a few references to initiatives involving work with landlords to support tenants' successful community tenure (Chien & Cole, 1973; Mize, Paolo-Calabrese, Williams, & Margolin, 1998; Truman & Hartenstein, 1990). Little systematic program development has been presented which addresses how landlords can be supportive of tenants or how positive working relationships can be developed between landlords, service providers, and housing programs.

### **Challenges of Making Connections with Natural Supports**

*Challenges faced by tenants.* Based upon ongoing evaluation of our housing programs, we have come to the conclusion that living in community settings without meaningful supportive social connections can contribute to the escalation of personal and health problems. New neighborhoods can be seen as unwelcoming and dangerous, and contribute to social isolation. Tenants have reported that issues of personal safety, discrimination, and lack of positive experiences with other neighborhood residents can become barriers to their efforts to interact with neighbors and neighborhood shopkeepers. In addition, supported housing programs serve tenants who have limited financial resources. Thus, many tenants do not have money to furnish their apartments and easily supply other household needs. These potential sources of instability pose a significant threat to tenants' community integration, restrict their quality of life, and encumber their efforts at recovery.

The subsidy provided by supported housing programs allows many tenants to be responsible for their own home for the first time. In our experience, a considerable number of tenants were not familiar with setting budget priorities, using public services, or having responsibility for apartment maintenance. Similarly, a relationship with a landlord is new to many of these individuals. Landlords may be seen as invading personal privacy when they check on apartments. Alternatively, tenants who have been socialized in treatment settings can see landlords as service providers, and when needed, ask them for a high level of assistance. When landlords do not respond as a service provider, tenants may see them as unavailable and uncaring. Such perceptions of landlords hinder cultivating supportive relationships with them.

### *Challenges faced by service providers.*

There is a growing awareness that service providers can take initial steps toward fostering such social connections with people outside of the mental health system, but they are limited in time and resources (Carling, 1995). Most clinicians and case managers concentrate on obtaining stable, affordable living arrangements for clients and encouraging participation in appropriate levels of treatment. The nature of increasing demands on service providers' time leave little room for promoting development of relationships between clients and their landlords and other individuals who can act as natural supports.

### *Challenges faced by landlords.*

Landlords participating in our programs have expressed apprehension or fear when they have learned that tenants in the program, and perhaps those living in their own buildings, have disabilities such as schizophrenia, HIV/AIDS, or substance abuse. Because of the confidentiality of medical records and housing law, housing programs do not notify landlords of the nature of specific tenants' disabilities, unless requested to do so by tenants. Staff members can discuss the range of experiences that tenants in a program have, and seek to educate participating landlords about the disabilities of individuals who are served by the housing program. In some cases, landlords are misinformed about the nature of these disabilities. Furthermore, a number of landlords participating in our program have observed that they often feel isolated in their own efforts as landlords and would appreciate opportunities to work with other interested community members. Many do not know where to start to be supportive of tenants or how to work with service providers while conducting their business as property owners.

**Table 1—Rights, Roles and Responsibilities of Tenants, Landlords and Service Providers**  
(adapted from TAC, 1994)

	ROLES	RESPONSIBILITIES	RIGHTS
Tenant	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Renter</li> <li>• Consumer of services</li> <li>• Concerned citizen</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Pay rent and bills on time</li> <li>• Maintain property in good condition</li> <li>• Respect rights of other tenants</li> <li>• Utilize services as needed</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Access to housing</li> <li>• Non-discrimination related to disability</li> <li>• Privacy and confidentiality of medical information</li> </ul>
Landlord	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provider of housing</li> <li>• Concerned citizen</li> <li>• Natural support</li> <li>• Consultant to housing program</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Maintain property in good condition</li> <li>• Arrange with tenant regular payment of his/her portion of rent</li> <li>• Address problems with both tenant and housing program</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Receive fair market rent</li> <li>• Fulfillment of lease agreements (e.g., prompt payment)</li> <li>• Respect condition of property</li> </ul>
Service Provider (e.g., clinician, case manager)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Care provider</li> <li>• Advocate for client</li> <li>• Consultant to housing program</li> <li>• Consult with landlords (with tenant consent)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Maintain contact with tenant as long as enrolled with service</li> <li>• Identify &amp; address problems that may affect tenancy</li> <li>• Notify housing program of any change in service</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Access to housing program resources for their clients</li> </ul>
Housing Program	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Administrator/Director</li> <li>• Technical assistant</li> <li>• Problem mediator</li> <li>• Trainer</li> <li>• Convener of stakeholders</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Screen referrals and apartments</li> <li>• Establish lease agreement and procedure for payment</li> <li>• Resolve problems with lease or tenancy</li> <li>• Develop programming to support successful housing</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Responses to requests for information related to housing program eligibility and lease agreements</li> </ul>

for their clients and continued participation in treatment. Although there were a few exceptions, most service providers were not actively involved in working with people in a proactive manner to support their new tenancy. Landlords came to early meetings looking for information about tenants, specific disorders, and how they could get their problems as landlords addressed. Many came demanding changes in the program given problems that they had encountered, such as delayed payments and lack of reimbursement for property destruction. They were frustrated that service providers were not readily available to deal with conflicts with tenants.

Many landlords could not understand why service providers would be reluctant to provide confidential personal information about "their clients" as landlords viewed this information as critical to the management of their property. Finally, some landlords wanted to take on responsibilities for the care of "their tenants" which concerned service providers about the kind of care and advice untrained landlords might give to "their clients."

It became clear that we needed to go beyond the training materials and develop systematic programming to address recurring needs of participants. It should be noted that in a few instances land-

lords and case managers had worked out agreements between themselves and tenants to address problematic situations. These few early successes at building a collaborative relationship seemed to have benefits for tenants and gave an indication of the importance of such working relationships. We concluded that there was a need for an ongoing forum to address concerns of these stakeholders if we wanted to support a large number of tenants in their efforts to succeed in community living.

*Establishment of the landlord-service provider forum.* Over the past 4 years, the forum has evolved into a series of quarterly meetings focused on promot-

new ideas generated by forum participants for how to handle difficult situations with tenants). This process of raising meaningful issues to participants and finding a way to address them with direct benefits is similar to the strategy that Saul Alinsky encouraged community organizers to consider (Alinsky, 1971). For us, addressing the direct interests of landlords helped to engage them, but also to build relationships and trust that allow for sustained collaboration.

Perhaps the most difficult practical barrier is that of finding time to work together. Many landlords connected to our housing program have other occupations and cannot meet easily during the day. Furthermore, landlords for whom property rental is a primary business also have demanding schedules due to their management of a large number of units. At the beginning of our work with supported housing, these landlords participated because they wanted to be part of the new project and have access to a reliable source of income (i.e., program guaranteed rental payments). Their participation has decreased in recent years. We have had the most success with landlords who have a small number of properties or who are retired from other work. Connecting with landlords and their busy schedules continues to be our most significant challenge.

*Challenges based upon role.* The second set of challenges arise from enduring tensions between the roles and perspectives of landlords, housing programs, and service providers. These include a discrepancy of goals, different costs associated with participation, and different responsibilities vis a vis tenants, property, and supportive services.

Although their interests can overlap around promoting success in community living, landlords, service providers, and tenants come to the supported housing table with different goals. Landlords have a financial stake in the

collaboration, tenants seek housing opportunities, and service providers have a responsibility to provide good care and to be responsive to the needs and desires of their clients. In our forum meetings, landlords seem to be more "outcome" driven, wanting to see tangible results and benefits on concrete issues (e.g., repairing property damage) without "talking issues to death." Service providers are much more willing to be "process" oriented in addressing problems and making incremental progress in functioning (e.g., help tenants take responsibility for damage). Similarly, service providers are more likely to use changes in attitude or knowledge as indices of progress. In the forum, we have tried to acknowledge the importance and justification for each of these goals. In doing so, we present the value of the process-oriented goals (e.g., changes in attitude, knowledge, relationship) as helping to prevent problems from occurring in the future or providing a means to respond to them early. When possible, we strive to create expectations of win-win situations as reasons for collaboration; it is our hope that such expectations may help participants transcend tensions in their roles.

The costs of participation in supported housing programs are very different for landlords and service providers. From their business perspective, landlords are concerned about having rents paid, minimizing costly property damage, and avoiding potential legal costs associated with eviction. Almost every landlord collaborating with our program has reported property damage in some apartments. Even when the damage has been done by a guest of the tenant, the cost to the landlord is the same. The program promptly addresses landlords' concerns by working with the tenant and service provider to pay for the damage. In some cases the housing program has paid for the damages when tenants

were not able to do so in a timely manner, and then the program sought reimbursement from the tenants involved.

The differences in costs experienced by landlords, service providers, and tenants often leads to the last major area of enduring tension—advocacy for "individuals' rights" vs. availability of information about "clients." In the legal system, landlords and service providers are often placed in opposing positions to advocate for what they need (e.g., landlords' financial interests vs. the interests of supporting tenants' rehabilitation and protecting their opportunities and rights to live in the community). Some landlords have demanded to review potential tenants' files or participate in the screening of tenants. Obviously, due to fair housing laws and professional practice, we have not accommodated these requests. While most landlords acknowledge and respect the confidentiality of medical records, for some it was too much of a risk to continue to participate without having more information about prospective tenants' potential problems and drug use history. However, other landlords have acknowledged that they have also had "trouble" with tenants who are not identified as having disabilities. These landlords seek ways to work with the housing program and service providers to address problems so that they do not result in significant property damage or lengthy eviction proceedings.

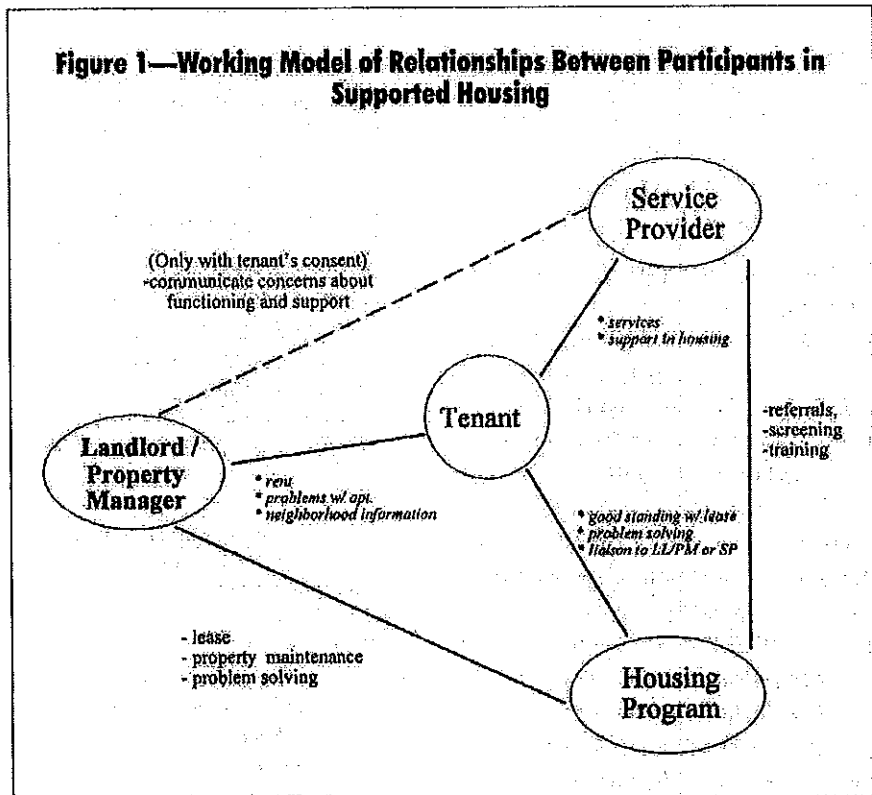
Over 5 years, we have come to understand that the purpose of the collaboration with landlords is not to eliminate these tensions, but to address them as they arise in our relationships and our work. As with any relationship, we have found that these tensions are realized in different manners at different times. Thus the goal of our intervention is to develop a working framework that can address these difficulties and provide enough common experience to build relationships that can withstand these ten-

opportunities, or advise tenants of places to avoid.

However, an active role by landlords can raise some difficulties when they undertake activities of a case manager or clinician. We do not want landlords to view their role in supported housing as becoming another social services worker. We emphasize the landlords' expertise in the management of their property and knowledge of the neighborhood and its social resources, something service providers cannot typically provide. Landlords' clear communication of expectations is critical for tenants to begin to view themselves as community members, rather than only as "clients." Furthermore, landlords' willingness to make reasonable accommodations to apartments based upon tenants' needs can be instrumental in creating an environment supportive for tenants (e.g., installing carpeting to muffle the sound of pacing, or to install dark blinds for a tenant particularly sensitive to light). If landlords are outgoing, they can introduce new tenants to neighbors and encourage them to make connections with people who have similar interests. A few landlords have even helped tenants locate furnishings through their network of contacts. We have found that promoting a personal relationship as a landlord knowledgeable about the apartment and the neighborhood can have much more meaning than many landlords would imagine.

### Model for Working With Landlords

Through our efforts to establish the Landlord-Service Provider Forum, we have developed a model that guides our work. As shown in Figure 1, each stakeholder in supported housing has a direct relationship with tenants. Landlords relate to tenants via the business concerns of lease, but also can expand the traditional landlord role to be experts about neighborhood resources. Service providers relate to tenants by offering



supportive services tailored to the tenant's needs, while the housing program staff focus on the logistics of rental arrangements. Landlords' and service providers' relationships with the housing program provide the practical framework that can support tenants, prevent problems, or solve those that arise. Hence, the housing program becomes the intersection where we engage landlords and service providers to address issues that affect tenants' success in housing. Finally, the relationship between service provider and landlord is portrayed with a dashed line to indicate that this is a secondary relationship. Within the forum and related interventions, they may interact in regard to supported housing or general needs, but not about specific issues with a tenant. Only with the documented consent of individuals do we facilitate communication directly between landlords and service providers.

### CONCLUSION

These programs involving landlords as collaborators are distinguished from other housing program initiatives in three fundamental ways. First, our goal of promoting success in supported housing has been greatly augmented by building partnerships with nontraditional participants in supported housing. Second, more than just education and training, the forum provides opportunities for active problem solving and prevention of problems. Third, forum participants have begun to assume a broader advocacy perspective. Participants have moved from a narrow view of supporting housing to one that works toward creating "healthy" social environments for tenants that nurture their recovery. If the forum continues to evolve, it has the potential to create structures and capacities for coalitions of interested citizens to address affordable housing and neighborhood con-