

STATE MENTAL HEALTH PLANNING COUNCIL POSITION PAPER ON TRANSITIONAL HOUSING

The President's New Freedom Commission recognizes that the goal of giving mental health consumers the ability to participate fully in their communities requires adequate and affordable housing. A key component of adequate and affordable housing is transitional housing for people with mental health and/or substance abuse issues who are going from a homeless situation or an institutional setting such as jail, prison or a hospital or shelter home, back into the community. Transitional housing is housing with supportive services attached as a key component of the living unit. Supportive services include things like drug and alcohol counseling, parenting classes, individual and group counseling, vocational services, G.E.D. classes and other self-improvement activities. As of 2007, Idaho has 28 transitional housing projects spread throughout the state that receive HUD funding through the Idaho Housing and Finance Association. The Idaho Housing and Finance Association estimates that 1,540 people will receive housing and supportive services in transitional housing in 2007. The Idaho Housing and Finance Association and the Department of Health and Welfare also operate a housing voucher program for people affected by mental illness. The program called Shelter Plus Care has 78 vouchers available in 2007. The Idaho Housing and Finance Association recognizes in their state plan that there is a huge unmet need for housing for people with mental illness and have assigned a highest priority to the problem in their housing plan. Unfortunately, the need for supportive housing is far greater than the number of available units.

Idaho has one of the fastest growing prison populations in the nation. The Idaho incarceration rate is 15% higher than the national average and we are 4th in the nation in growth of prison population. Many of these inmates suffer from mental health and substance abuse problems

or both. If the current prison population continues to grow, Idaho will face a billion dollar price tag on prisons and prison infrastructure over the next ten years. The court system recognizes the huge cost of incarceration and has set up alternative courts in all seven judicial districts. Drug courts and mental health courts are diverting hundreds of people from incarceration. These people need supportive housing to maintain their recovery and avoid expensive incarceration. Transitional housing will allow them to not return to homes or neighborhoods where there is ongoing substance abuse and other criminal activity. At any given time there are almost a 1,000 people state wide enrolled in court diversion programs such as drug courts or mental health courts. Currently, there are over 300 inmates per month leaving the Department of Corrections and returning to Idaho communities. Transitional housing allows these alternative court participants and people exiting the correctional system to learn positive behaviors, continue employment, and avoid risky behaviors and poor choices such as substance abuse and criminal behavior.

Another very important group that needs transitional housing are persons in a mental health crisis or persons coming out of a short term crisis hospitalization or longer stays in the state hospital system. Experts agree that a supportive housing model saves taxpayers money with this population. Researchers at the University of California Berkeley studied 250 people with mental illness who used transitional housing. Before the study group was in supportive housing they frequently used the emergency rooms of area hospitals costing taxpayers thousands per year. Once they were in a supportive housing environment emergency room visits dropped by almost 60%! There was also a corresponding drop in the length of hospital stays and virtual elimination of use of residential mental health facilities.

Throughout Idaho there are ACT teams working with the seriously mentally ill. ACT teams provide an evidence based best practice model for dealing with the chronically mentally ill in the community. It is critical that affordable and safe housing is available to these clients to keep them out of emergency rooms, the State Hospital system and the criminal justice system. Currently the Regional Mental Health boards are doing gap analyses of needs in their regions. Several regions have identified supportive housing as a major gap in available services. The community collaboration grants have funded supportive housing projects in several regions. The need still is far greater than the availability.

The key component of transitional housing is the supportive services. It is critical to the success and continued recovery of persons returning from incarceration or institutionalization or those involved in alternative courts to be monitored for compliance with treatment plans and to be involved in self-help activities. Examples of supportive services can include medication monitoring, job skills classes, counseling regarding substance abuse, budgeting and personal finance skills and parenting classes. Most transitional housing programs require the tenants to sign contracts that mandate participation in supportive services. It is not enough to put a roof over someone's head if they have a history of substance abuse or mental health problems. They need ongoing help and monitoring to continue on the path to recovery. Even with the cost of providing a full array of supportive services it is way less expensive than putting people in institutions and prisons. If we do not address the problem, it will only continue to get worse.

The State Planning Council urges the legislature to continue to work to address this critical problem. Idaho Housing and Finance Association recognizes that housing for the mentally ill is a high priority in our state. We need to continue to develop public and private partnerships to enhance

supportive housing opportunities in our state. Transitional housing will help meet the New Freedom Commission's goal of allowing consumers to participate fully in our communities as well as saving taxpayer money by avoiding more expensive incarceration or hospitalization.