

Keys to Independence: Supportive Housing

Dave Richard, Nicole Kiefer

Housing plays a key role in all of our lives. It impacts our health, education, employment, recreation, and social opportunities. For people with intellectual and/or developmental disabilities (I/DD), the creation of accessible community housing is critical. The Arc of North Carolina, which provides services and advocacy for people with I/DD, has been developing new models of housing for people with I/DD for more than 35 years. Over that period, the design of those housing models has evolved, based on principles of self-determination that support people with I/DD to become more involved members of their communities.

Housing for people with I/DD has shifted from large institutions to smaller group homes to more individualized models. Two of the largest barriers to independent living are cost and available support services. People with disabilities receiving Supplemental Security Income are among North Carolina's lowest-income citizens, and they are priced out of the traditional housing market. The choices that are affordable on their income are often unsafe and inaccessible. Therefore they often remain at home with family or are forced into more restrictive settings. In addition, for people with I/DD, affordable housing itself is not enough. Because their disability is lifelong, appropriate services must be consistently available to support them in living in their own homes.

In an effort to address these needs, The Arc of North

Carolina has developed more than 240 supportive-housing projects for people with I/DD, while advocating for support services that meet individual needs. Serving more than 1,500 people, these residences are operated in partnership with local service providers and range from group homes with 5-6 residents, to small apartment buildings, duplexes, and condominiums. The Arc Rowan Apartments and High Point Condominiums are 2 examples of creative options that allow people with disabilities to choose the least restrictive settings possible and realize their housing dreams.

The Arc Rowan Apartments consist of 2 scattered-site quadruplexes for people with I/DD in Salisbury, North Carolina. Each newly constructed building looks like a single-family home and blends in with the neighborhood. One apartment is accessible for a tenant who uses a wheelchair and another is accessible for someone with a visual impairment. A unique feature is the central living space. Each apartment has both an exterior entrance and an entrance to the common area, which includes a laundry room and a furnished living room; residents also share a front porch and a backyard patio. One of the biggest fears of independent living for people with I/DD is social isolation, so this unique design offers not just the privacy of an apartment, but also space for socializing, networking with peers, and mutual support.

In addition to constructing new housing, The Arc of

Finally, substandard housing can negatively affect mental health. A study has shown that damp, moldy, and cold indoor conditions are associated with psychological disorders such as anxiety and depression. Other studies have found that substandard housing is linked with social isolation among children and with lower levels of self-esteem and life satisfaction among both homeowners and renters [17].

Conclusion

It is clear from this brief review that housing affordability, overcrowding, and substandard housing have important effects on both physical and mental health. So, how can public health and city planning professionals work together to address those problems before they make people sick? One overarching strategy would be to form local and statewide healthy housing advocacy coalitions that could bring public health professionals, planners, and other interested parties together to develop action strategies [13]. Based on assessments of local conditions, these coalitions could advocate for the adoption of a policy requiring health impact assessments for all proposed development. They might also advocate for programs that would assist residents in identifying and correcting home health hazards. In addition they might advocate for revisions to building and housing codes (to make them

better reflect current knowledge of what constitutes healthful housing) and for better enforcement of those codes. Finally, housing and health coalitions could lobby at all levels of government for more funding for affordable housing programs so that fewer households would have to compromise their health to put a roof over their heads. NCMJ

William M. Rohe, PhD Boshamer Distinguished Professor of City and Regional Planning and director, Center for Urban and Regional Studies, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Chapel Hill, North Carolina.

Hye-Sung Han, PhD candidate, Department of City and Regional Planning, Center for Urban and Regional Studies, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Chapel Hill, North Carolina.

Acknowledgment

Potential conflicts of interest. W.M.R. and H.S.H. have no relevant conflicts of interest.

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North Carolina has also purchased and renovated numerous condominiums and duplexes at scattered sites. In High Point, The Arc purchased 4 2-bedroom condominiums in established, safe developments to provide supportive housing for up to 8 people with I/DD. In order to facilitate integration and participation in community activities, the condominiums are located on a bus line and are close to employment, recreation, shopping, and services. The Arc renovated the condominiums to be energy efficient and made 1 of the units wheelchair accessible.

The Arc Rowan Apartments and High Point Condominiums do not have live-in staff, but tenants receive various services based on their individual needs from a provider of their choice. These services may include assistance with finding employment, budgeting and paying bills, planning menus, preparing food, shopping, maintaining a safe environment, and other activities of daily living. Although these services are not a requirement of tenancy, these supportive and skill-building services are essential for people with I/DD to be able to maintain themselves in independent housing.

Financing for these projects was provided by a combination of federal, state, and local resources. The Arc Rowan Apartments were funded in part by the US Department of Housing and Urban Development Section 811 Supportive Housing for Persons with Disabilities program, and both projects received funding from the Housing 400 Initiative of the Supportive Housing Development Program administered by the North Carolina Housing Finance Agency and the North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services. The City of High Point also contributed to the funding for High Point Condominiums. Ongoing oper-

ating subsidies are essential to making these apartments affordable for people with disabilities.

Having a home of one's own is an important value in our society, and the tenants of The Arc Rowan Apartments, High Point Condominiums, and similar projects are thriving in their new roles as tenants, neighbors, and community members. With these new roles have come not only newfound independence, but also increased self-esteem. As Terry, a young man who lives in 1 of the apartments, told us:

I am able to be more independent now that I have my own place and I can do things for myself. I have learned how to use my stove and have opened up a bank account. I would not have been able to afford to move into another place because it would have been too expensive. **NCMJ**

Dave Richard executive director, The Arc of North Carolina, Raleigh, North Carolina.

Nicole Kiefer assistant director, Housing Resources, The Arc of North Carolina, Raleigh, North Carolina.

Acknowledgment

Potential conflicts of interest. D.R. and N.K. have no relevant conflicts of interest.

Electronically published October 12, 2012.

Address correspondence to Mr. Dave Richard, The Arc of North Carolina, 343 East Six Forks Road, Ste 320, Raleigh, NC 27609 (drichard@arcnc.org).

N C Med J. 2012;73(5):379-380. ©2012 by the North Carolina Institute of Medicine and The Duke Endowment. All rights reserved. 0029-2559/2012/73516

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