

Suggestions for Opening an Oxford House for Women

Topic: Building Local Support for a House

We make the assumption that when a women's house is well connected with local agencies/individuals who are involved with treatment or ancillary services, the individual women and the house will do better over time. The linkages help women get to the assistance they need. The linkages to community resources can also be defined as part of the support that is available to the house. What strategies are there for building local support for a house?

1. Make concrete support commitments be a condition of an agreement to develop a house. Examples: volunteer to set community meetings, individual or a group to furnish a house, guarantee of slots in a parenting class, health care linkages, other.
2. Form an ad hoc advisory group to get the house established and linked to resources.
3. Identify a volunteer or paid sponsor who can help bring the new house on line and to provide support over time.
4. As part of the development process, organize a community meeting that involves key agencies or individuals who are important as resources.
5. Have representation for the house at regular meetings set up for local agencies
6. Identify all the potential sources of local support of linkage, including women's shelters, drop-in centers, etc.
7. How do you get others to buy in to support in a meaningful way?
8. Communicate that support needs are ongoing. There will be variance in the amount of support a house needs. Needs of a new house are different from the needs of a well-established house.
9. Have a good relationship with all treatment centers so a woman knows where she can get counseling. Network with employment and training centers. Examples are: Women's Employment Network, Vocational Rehab, etc. Not all cities have parenting classes, other support groups, etc. When a house first opens, find out information on all that you can. Invite support groups over to the house and talk to other women in recovery. Get all the resource information for women that you can find and put it in a resource book for the house.
10. Women who don't work or go to school should be expected to do 20 hours of volunteer work each week. By sending them to women's agencies, the resident enjoys it and learns at the same time and the agencies, like the National Council on Alcohol and Drug Abuse, love us too. It's great promotion for Oxford House.

Topic: Recruiting new house Members

1. Maintain regular contacts with treatment agencies. This is important when there are vacancies, but it is useful to maintain contacts even when there are no vacancies. Counselors tend to be busy and it is easy for them to forget about your house if they haven't referred recently. You remind people by being visible.
2. Having good relationships with a few key counselors can be important. Often a few counselors make the majority of referrals to a house.
3. Establish contacts with other referral sources such as halfway houses, transitional houses, TASK agencies (for incarcerated individuals) and other local agencies. The more referral sources who know about your house the better.
4. Turnover of treatment counselors is high. As a result, counselors who referred in the past may be gone. Keep your contacts at treatment centers up to date.
5. Do presentations often at treatment and other agencies, which refer to our houses.
6. Brochures or handouts, which describe the house, can be left at referral agencies. The information should include eligibility criteria. Applications need to be available at referring agencies. Business cards for a house might be helpful.
7. Do special mailings to referral agencies at the time of vacancies or when vacancies are known to be coming. Planned vacancies are helpful since this allows the house to recruit before the vacancy occurs and thus avoid empty beds and loss of revenue.
8. Mailings - such as one announcing vacancies can be made in advance so that a supply is read when needed.
9. In states where county government is a key player in the drug/alcohol services, you should become known to the county staff who are responsible for services. The county staff can open the doors to scheduled meetings of treatment agencies, help you network and help access other services when needed by women and children.
10. Find out if there are local meetings of all treatment agencies in the area. If there are, this is another audience you should know.
11. Are house members participating in local recovery groups such as AA/NA? Participation is a visible testimonial to successful house functioning.
12. Houses with good reputations are their own recruiting tool. You want a house that new women will want to live in.
13. Train house members to do public presentations about your house. You can practice presentations within the house.

14. Ask the Chapter Housing Service Committee to work with your house on recruitment.
15. Have an open house and invite agency people who are important to the success of the house. An open house even doesn't have to be limited to recognition of a new house.
16. A house can be more selective when there are multiple applications and the house isn't in a financial crisis due to vacancies. Planned vacancies make a big difference.
17. Following through with referral sources is important. Keep appointments and other commitments you make. Failure to follow through damages your credibility and that of your house and can lead to referrals drying up.

The more clean time a new member has moving in, the more stable the house will be from the beginning, especially for women with children's houses. Women who have good jobs, programs of recovery, and social skills make the best recipe for success. Where do we find these women?

1. AA/NA meetings. Start hitting all within area surrounding prospective house, especially women's meetings. Women who attend meetings with no men are really serious about recovery.
2. For Profit Treatment Centers - These women have to have money or insurance (or a good enabler) to be admitted.
3. All other Treatment Centers - Do presentations and attend in-house AA/NA at all treatment centers.
4. Sponsors and Counselors -If they buy into oxford House, they will send people.
5. Some meetings, treatment centers, etc in outlying areas can be good because they will be changing their playground.
6. Existing men's houses - (they always seem to have girlfriends new in recovery that really need an oxford house for women), and of course existing women's houses. You are really lucky if you can get two or three really strong diplomatic members to move into a new house, but women don't seem as willing to help or give back as men.

Topic: Disruptive Behaviors and House Limits

This is probably the major issue for women's houses. The broad area includes: managing internal disputes among house members, setting and reinforcing house rules and expectations, responding to and managing behaviors that are disruptive to the house.

1. Make sure that house rules/boundaries/guidelines are established. Review them with new women. Make sure each woman signs her own copy upon admission.
2. Insist that all women are participating in a recovery program and that they have sponsors.
3. Make sure there is a weekly time for sharing.

4. Post the list of established boundaries

5. What steps can be taken once a program arises? Confrontations- how to manage? Contracts- what are you trying to achieve?

6. The behavior patterns listed below are seen in women's houses -what ways are there to respond to these behaviors?

1. the whiner
2. the controller
3. the "1", "self," "me"
4. the slob
5. the little red hen syndrome
6. the non-participant isolator
7. the manipulator
8. the relationship junkie
9. the boarding house attitude

7. Teach women how to talk out conflicts without yelling or cursing, etc. This is a skill that requires practice. Are there ways to practice?

8. Learn to bring concerns to the house meeting. The house meeting is the heartbeat of a woman's house. There is safety in numbers, especially if the house meetings have a process built in.

9. Having an outreach worker (where available) actually start and live in a new house for a time is an asset as the worker can instill the values and rules. A similar role can be played by women who have lived successfully in Oxford House. When a house has experienced a complete turnover of women, the house may need the presence of an outreach worker or woman from another house. It is like starting over.

10. Are there ways to train house officers that enhance their skills to manage conflict and run a group process?

11. How do you decide on new rules and how do you implement the rules once you have decided?

12. Outreach worker should learn skills on conflict management and know how to diffuse situations.

13. Is dispute disruptive to the house? If so, have a special meeting and discuss with all members to get to the root of the problem, the problem is probably not what it appears to be. Put members having dispute on contract so they know that if they continue to disrupt the house, they will be evicted.

14. What if half the house is feuding with the other half? Everyone is focusing on what everyone else is doing and no on their own personal recovery. Put emphasis on meetings and parliamentary procedures. If they are making motions and coming up with solutions, or at least voting on issues, they feel heard, and it cuts down on wasted time arguing with each other.

15. Invite Housing Service or members from another house over to share their own experiences and solutions or at least to shame and guilt them into doing the right thing.

16. Always try to guide the women into solving problems on their own. That way they also get the benefit of feeling good about themselves for working it out.

17. Probation during the first 30 days in the house, which means no overnights in or out of the house. Some houses even have a curfew because women started coming home at 6:00 am thinking this wasn't spending the night out. If a woman is not willing to wait 30 days before spending the night with her man, we know what is more important to her. The house needs to get to know her and she needs to get to know the house. The first 30 days are probably the most important in a resident's life. It will make or break her. The house member will either become attached to the house or to an outside idol (man). If the woman bonds with the house, she is on the road to recovery.

18. No overnight guests allowed until the \$4000 loan is paid off. This is okay. Maybe a little harsh, but all the houses that have opened that way still do not allow overnight guests even after the loan was paid off. The women feel like it's their house and men shouldn't stay there. We are just trying to ensure the stability of the house.

19. At the end of the 30-day probation period, all other women in the house share how they feel the new member is getting along. Usually it's mainly assets about the person with a few defects here and there, but the new residents feel a sense of belonging and self-worth.

20. No overnight guests in houses with children.

21. A resident must spend at least four nights a week in the house. If she lives there less than one-half of the time, she is not providing support to anyone else and obviously doesn't need Oxford House.

22. Only have overnight guest two nights a week.

23. \$25 fine if late or miss house meeting.

24. If you are going to be gone from the house for an extended period of time, get approval from the house at prior house meeting (vacation, etc)

25. House should set policy of calling in when residents are away; if they do not, house may consider them relapsed.

26. Use contracts made by the women of the house instead of eviction for behavioral problems. Must have exact guidelines - act better, have a good attitude, no door slamming, no yelling and do not leave personal belongings out. Phone calls limited to 15 minutes, five meetings per week. Use specific items so if the person does not follow through, she will be evicted. Usually if it is an attitude problem, she is not attending meetings.

27. If a house has to have consequences, make it directly related to negative acts. If messes are left in kitchen, the kitchen might be off limits for a week. If there is trouble disciplining a child, parenting classes might be required. Not working after 30 days - do volunteer work. Helpless behavior - do not enable - give her things to do; for example take bus to job interview, call treatment centers for the house, etc. many small things can lead to bigger things.

28. Ask the person having problems what type of action the house could take to best help her to be more responsible. The person never says "nothing;" usually she knows what she should be doing.

29. If each officer knows exactly what her responsibility is and if the whole house also knows when something is not done, we know exactly whom to blame.

30. Holding an office is very important to a woman's recovery. It is a small accomplishment but if told how to do it thoroughly and correctly, it can make a woman feel good about herself. New people should get involved in house matters. When the same people hold office for one or two years and then move out, the other members are lost. It also causes resentments and feelings of inequality when the same people "run" the house without passing on everything they know.

31. When a house opens, you must remind members that everyone is equal in the house. Encourage new members to ask questions and give their input. You must encourage them because new women will not speak up and assume that the senior members run the house.

32. One thing I've found that helps is to validate the way someone is feeling in a house meeting and let her know that is normal. It's okay to be angry with Peggy for using your shampoo. Most women in recovery feel like they need a relationship-- and so on. Once you let them know they are feeling and acting normally, you can then suggest better options or choices they could make. They will feel like the house understands them and will support them through their growth. This approach allows them to "change their thinking" without becoming defensive, aggressive, or isolated from the house because someone said they were bad.

33. Women's low self-esteem is the basis of most house dysfunction. They don't take criticism well, so you must be very tactful but firm and get to the root of the problem. I attended a house meeting the other night where women complained for one hour about Theresa getting fines, forgetting things, leaving her stuff out, etc. They had all these fines and chores for her to do when really they were afraid to confront her on her relapse behavior, sloppiness and disrespect she had for the house. Women can be very passive aggressive.

34. Encourage women to be a part of the Housing Service Committee. Women need other women to sit in on their house meeting, not three or four men who all have to share their own personal views after each issue. You end up being there for they're for hours because the men like to hear themselves talk and many times have ulterior motives. I hope I'm not coming across as a man-hater, because women have a lot to learn from men, such as being assertive, don't take everything personally, do it yourself, and get a good job which promotes a feeling of accomplishment and good self-esteem. It's just that a percentage of the men have a different message to bring to the women. There are some cases where the women listen and respect the men's advice more, but generally women members lend more help and understanding to other women's houses.

35. Most importantly – Never, never, never go back on your word or a decision. If someone knows they will be evicted if they do a certain thing - you must evict them immediately - If a woman has 24 hours to make her rent commitment and she says now it will be next week- she has to go. You must set a precedent especially early on, so people know the house means what it says. I believe everyone

deserves a chance, but if you knew, then don't be surprised. A house must always stand behind a decision it makes and so must the outreach worker!

Topic: Building a House Culture That Works for Women and Support Their Recovery

The culture of the house is all-important to the success of the house and the recovery of each individual in the house. The collective strengths of the house support and nurture each individual.

1. Houses should be in good neighborhoods so that women can take pride in their home.
2. House expectations need to be very clear and in writing at the time the house is opened. The Oxford House Manual IS a good starting point:
3. The house expectations and the Manual need to be followed. In the long run, it is easier to begin with strict adherence to rules than it is to start with loose rules and discovers the need for tighter rules.
4. Have the clear expectation that participation in recovery (aftercare, outpatient, 12-step) program is required. Informally, and as part of the weekly groups, check on resident participation in their recovery program.
5. The house needs to have weekly meeting with attendance required.
6. Use house meetings to strengthen house community, Plan fun events, experiment with group problem solving, invite guest speakers (nutrition, eating disorders, relapse prevention, parenting, and other issues) A house full of women who are all doing their own thing and who are not well connected with their housemates does not offer a strong recovery community.
7. House traditions are important, but they are easy to lose sight of as new members come and go. The orientation of each new member to the house is a good opportunity to restate the house traditions and why they are important.
8. One important house tradition is that the success of the house is important to all the women who follow you. When you leave, you want to leave a strong house that will support the recovery of new women.
9. Elect house officers who are committed to running a strong house that supports women in recovery. Women's houses do not naturally become supportive, loving recovery environments after they open. To accomplish this, you must start nurturing the first day the house opens, even if only two women have moved in that day.
10. Tell your story and what Oxford House has done for you over, and over, and over, and over, to every person that moves in, Use Instances that happened in your own house so new women will feel more at home and know what to expect for the future end what is expected from them.
11. Talk recovery, Eat, breath, sleep, recovery, take women to meetings

12. When a woman first moves into a new house is when her habits and expectations are going to become a part of her life. If you start off each day of the new house with a great recovery attitude and plenty of support. The house members will copy your actions, and become supportive to each other and start working a program

13 What they don't know won't hurt them - If they have not seen people get away with stuff in the house and if they haven't been around women with bad attitudes who don't go to meetings and sleep with every male in recovery, it will not cross their minds that negative behavior is acceptable.

14, Recovery- meetings- how goes it- we are competent women -must be part of the message every day.

Topic: Empowering House Members to Grow

Oxford Houses offer women a clean and sober environment that supports their recovery. The challenge is to empower women so that they can move on with their lives while in an Oxford House and after they leave. An Oxford House is like a staging area as you prepare for the rest of your life.

1. Give women responsibilities in the house along with the training to carry out their responsibilities
2. Give credit and praise jobs that are well done.
3. Expect and support women in following their recovery program. Continuing your recovery program allows the stability to address other parts of your life.
4. Encourage women to pursue steps that improve their future i.e., education, employment, training, therapy, parenting classes, and other.
5. Work with a sponsor.
6. Find activities and successes that build positive self-esteem
7. Each house must have positive role models. Role models who share their story and give other women hope and someone to identify with.
- 8 Teach them how everything in the house works and encourage them to be involved because you know they can do it.
9. Don't give them any excuses to fail (I didn't know that) -cover everything thoroughly to everyone.
10. Support them but NEVER enable them. Give them the tools so they can do it themselves.
11. Have them repeat 100 times every day -I do not need a man, I do not need a man!" (Just kidding)

Topic: How to Help. Women Connect to the Recovery Community

A strong commitment to recovery is the best investment a woman can make. The recovery program may be aftercare, outpatient, 12 Step, or other model. Living in a clean and sober house like Oxford House supports recovery program but the housing is not a substitute for maintaining a recovery program.

1. Women in recovery tend to follow their role models. If the house is set up so that a recovery program is required, the women tend to follow through the standard is set when the house opens.
2. Is there someone in the recovery or treatment community willing to adopt a house as a Sponsor. The presence of an interested person who knows treatment and recovery may be an incentive to house members to follow their recovery program
3. As potential new members are interviewed, ask for details of their recovery plan; frequency, time and place, and sponsor.
4. Make sure that counselors with treatment agencies know that a defined recovery program is expected for women being referred and for women who are in the house. Counselors can be helpful in reinforcing the expectation for involvement in a recovery program.
5. Invite visitors or presentations by individuals from the treatment community. If dieting, relapse prevention or other topic is of interest to the house, find someone to come in to discuss the topic.
6. All women should follow in the footsteps of others by going to meetings and their aftercare new members should be required to attend their meetings and aftercare. PEER PRESSURE - MEETINGS, MEETINGS, MEETINGS

Topic: How Do You Screen Women Who Are Appropriate for Oxford House?

The screening and interview process is very important to a house. The strengths and weaknesses of the house are a reflection of the mix of women.

1. House interviews with prospective new residents should be clear about house expectations. Candidates who are not comfortable with the rules and expectations will often eliminate themselves from consideration. Help women self-select out.
2. Be selfish about yourself and your house. Accepting someone who probably isn't a good fit can drag you and your house down.
3. Don't expect a woman who is argumentative about rules and expectations during a house interview to be a different person once she lives in the house.
4. Is the woman serious about her recovery and does she have a definite recovery plan (what is it, where is it, when is it and with whom?)

- 5 Do you have a job or will you get one?

Topic: Saying No To Overnight Male Guests

Having male overnight guests is a major cause of house disruption.

- 1 Set a non-negotiable rule that prohibits male overnight guests.
- 2 A prohibition of overnight male guests needs consequences that the house is willing and able to enforce.
- 3 What are the rules for male visitors to the house: hours, where in the house visits are permitted, behavior expectations of men, and others?

Topic: How Can You Encourage Women to Stay Longer

Short residencies increase relapse following departure and the high turnover jeopardizes house stability.

- 1 Ask for a three-month commitment at the time of admission
- 2 For women who enter an Oxford House from a correctional setting, there may be some legal leverage.

Topic: Criteria for Starting Houses in New Communities

A decision to develop a new house involves criteria that help to determine whether the house location is feasible and the house can be supported. Not every community can support a house. What are some of the variables and how can they be addressed.

- 1 Are there sufficient women in the treatment/recovery community to support a new house?
- 2 Given the rental rates in the community, what is the minimum number of roommates needed for a house to survive financially?
- 3 Are there local substance abuse treatment agencies that serve women?
- 4 Are the local treatment agencies in support of having a house for women?
- 5 Are ancillary services available in the community that women will need, i.e., health, employment, childcare, parenting classes, other?
- 6 Are the ancillary service agencies interested in having a house?

7. Are treatment and ancillary service agencies who "say they want the new house" willing to make concrete commitments of services or relationships that will support a house over time?
8. Is the community large enough to support a house?
9. Is there employment available to the women in the house?
10. Are there potential neighborhoods suitable for a house?
11. Is there someone available with the skills to start a house?
12. Are there minimum criteria for a house to survive in a community?