

Promoting Tenant Advisory Groups in Supportive Housing



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The supportive housing model recognizes the inherent dignity in all people. Low-income tenants and people with mental health conditions who were formerly homeless are offered an affordable apartment combined with voluntary supports and services that can help increase self-determination. As supportive housing grows in New York and the country, tenant engagement and empowerment are recognized as important factors in maintaining secure and thriving residences.

Tenant advisory groups are a promising initiative taking hold in New York supportive housing, and may be a scalable approach to encouraging self-advocacy and recovery. In advisory groups, tenants exchange experiences, propose solutions and initiatives,

and provide feedback to management regarding issues at their residences. This setting encourages tenants to advocate for their needs and collaborate on meaningful decisions about their home life and community.

Creating an advisory relationship between tenants and staff also builds trust and mutuality, which can be an important foundation for people as they recover from disempowerment experienced while homeless. In addition, it strengthens tenants' communication and leadership skills as well as their relationships with neighbors and community members.

A tenant advisory group doesn't only help supportive housing tenants; the approach also enhances the

residence itself. In particular, the process helps ensure issues at the residence are addressed by staff and senior leadership in a way that respects tenant priorities and preferences. Advisory group members become trusted peers in each residence, and can represent the needs of neighbors who don't feel motivated to self-advocate. Elected tenant leaders also provide a valuable and personal perspective to staff that they may not access otherwise.

Community Access, a 44-year old nonprofit that empowers mental health recipients by providing quality housing and employment services, created a tenant advisory council, known as the Program Participant Advisory Group (PPAG), over four years ago. One of the first in New York City, the PPAG is a tenant body democratically elected by Community Access tenants that advises senior management and creates initiatives. For example, the PPAG designed a program that offers small grants to tenant applicants trying to regain employment. Grants have enabled tenants to complete courses in massage therapy and medical billing and obtain licenses and certificates in commercial driving and food handling. The PPAG also initiated karaoke events.

Each month, the PPAG brings its own karaoke equipment to a different Community Access residence and facilitates an event where tenants and staff share songs and build community as well as share events and community resources. Tenants travel from all over the city, getting to know new neighborhoods and meeting other tenants. Karaoke events are one of the most well-attended Community Access events, in part because they were started and are run by tenants.

Urban Pathways - a 43-year old social services and supportive housing nonprofit for homeless adults - also engages in robust advisory group efforts. Each transitional and permanent housing residence holds a regularly occurring self-advocacy group where individuals address residence issues and work on self-advocacy. Urban Pathways also holds a twice monthly Thursday night issue-based advocacy group for current and former clients to become better issue-based advocates. Recent speakers include the Deputy Chief of Staff to City Council Speaker Corey Johnson

as well as the Chief of Staff and Deputy Chief of Staff to State Assembly Member Andrew Hevesi on the role of the city and state governments in advocacy.

In this framework of engaging and empowering supportive housing tenants, on Tuesday, April 17, from 3 to 5 p.m. there will be a Forum on Tenant Advisory Groups at Fountain House at 425 West 47th Street in Manhattan.

The forum - the first in a series - will focus on starting a group and empowering tenant advocacy. Supportive housing providers currently doing advisory groups - Community Access, Urban Pathways and Breaking Ground - will discuss barriers to creating groups, provide examples of best practices, and suggest resources for providers interested in establishing groups. There will also be an audience question-and-answer session focused on four areas: how advisory groups advocate for fellow tenants; getting staff on board; involving senior management; and future goals.

We encourage supportive housing tenants, staff, and management as well as recipients of mental health services to attend the Tuesday forum to learn about how advisory groups can build upon the strong legacy of supportive housing in New York and beyond.

Nicole Bramstedt is the Director of Policy at [Urban Pathways](#), a nonprofit social services and supportive housing organization serving homeless adults. On Twitter at [@UrbanPathwaysNY](#).

Carla Rabinowitz is the Advocacy Coordinator at [Community Access](#), a 44-year old nonprofit that empowers mental health recipients by providing quality supportive housing and employment training. On Twitter at [@ca_nyc](#).