

PROMISING PRACTICES IN HOME AND COMMUNITY-BASED SERVICES

Wisconsin – Supported Housing for People with Disabilities

Issue: Individualized Housing Solutions under Wisconsin’s Medicaid Waiver Programs

Summary

The State of Wisconsin employs a supported housing specialist who works with local communities to help people with disabilities and their families to find affordable housing solutions. In addition to assisting individuals in finding housing, the supported housing specialist works with individuals with disabilities and their families, local agencies, developers, real estate agents, housing providers, lenders, consumer groups and other stakeholders to build relationships among the parties to improve housing access for people with disabilities.

Introduction

Systems that support people with disabilities traditionally do not include housing policies. When housing and supports are entwined, the two are often combined in institutional or group settings. As a result, housing problems for people with disabilities are often viewed as a result of the disability. The State of Wisconsin’s Department of Health and Family Services, Division of Supportive Living, approaches the issue from a different point of view: that poverty – not disability – is the foundation for housing problems. Disability is merely a factor that can exacerbate the problem. As a result, the state has focused on finding *affordable housing*, rather than finding *housing for people with disabilities*.

Poverty – not disability is considered the foundation for housing problems.

This report briefly describes the work of Wisconsin’s supported housing specialist and how she works with local communities to help people with disabilities and their families to find affordable housing solutions. This document is based on interviews with the supported housing specialist and reports and supporting material on the program produced by the Wisconsin Council on Developmental Disabilities.

Background

Wisconsin’s supported housing initiative started shortly after the introduction of the Community Supported Living Arrangements (CSLA) waiver, a Medicaid home and community-based services waiver for people with developmental disabilities established in 1992 as a pilot program to offer people greater control over their housing and the services that help them to live independently. CSLA is available to people whose living environment is under their own or their guardian’s control. The person may also own a home or be a party to a lease if a home is rented. The success of CSLA was dependent upon the availability of affordable, accessible, safe, and decent housing for people with disabilities. As a result, the state recognized that creating housing solutions was essential.

The state developed a supported housing initiative to address this need. The Wisconsin Council on Developmental Disabilities first funded a supported housing specialist to implement the initiative. The position is now funded through the Wisconsin Department of Health and Family Services. Persons eligible for assistance are children and adults on one of three Medicaid home and community-based services waivers that serve people with

developmental disabilities or people with brain injuries.

Intervention

Wisconsin's supported housing specialist works with individuals with disabilities and their families to find individualized housing solutions that address their housing needs. The nature of this solution is based on the needs of the person. Examples include home ownership, relocation from a nursing home, and transitional housing for a homeless family including a child with a disability.

The specialist's first step is to understand each customer's needs. The second step is to bring together the right resources to achieve results. Based on a belief that poverty, not disability, is

The specialist identifies resources to help people with disabilities find affordable housing.

at the root of people's housing problems, the program identifies financial resources as well as resources from the service system for people with disabilities. The specialist works with Medicaid waiver case managers, local service provider agencies, housing providers, developers, real estate agents, advocacy groups and other stakeholders to build relationships among the parties to improve housing outcomes for people with disabilities.

For example, if a person wants to own a home, the supported housing specialist will help to develop an approach that looks at whether the goal is affordable and makes sense for them and, if so, to design a plan with local partners to turn that dream into a reality. The strategy may include developing long-term plans to help people qualify for mortgages, or perhaps help them learn about financial options ranging from mortgage products to housing rehabilitation benefits to housing adaptation benefits.

Although initially most of the effort involved working one-on-one to help people with disabilities, over the last few years the supported housing specialist's work has increasingly involved building local housing capacity. The

supported housing specialist works with the public and private sectors to develop the relationships and partnerships that bridge the divide between the very different worlds of people with disabilities, the support system (i.e.: case managers, service providers), and the housing sector (i.e., landlords, lenders, developers, local housing organizations, contractors).

The specialist's one-on-one work helps bridge this divide. The specialist's advocacy for particular individuals enables local success stories, and gives contractors, developers, and others positive experiences in working with persons with disabilities. The success stories in turn generate positive public relations within the support system about Wisconsin's supported housing initiative in general and the specific results it has achieved for individuals with disabilities.

When the supported housing initiative started, people primarily heard about the program through their local housing organizations. In the beginning, the supported housing specialist did presentations all over the state, and reached out to housing providers. A decade later, consumers learn about the program from a variety of sources, including housing agencies, case managers, the state's Web site, and parents of children with disabilities who have been helped by the program. The supported housing specialist has also

The specialist has written a number of materials on supported housing.

authored or co-authored a number of materials on supported housing, including home-buying and new construction guides for people with disabilities. She has also collaborated on a 4-booklet series on issues related to renting or owning a home, including income supports and the impact of renting or owning on public benefits.

Impact

Because it is not a formal program with defined outcomes, the effectiveness of Wisconsin's supported housing initiative is perhaps best

measured by its track-record of success in finding individual housing solutions for persons with disabilities. An August 1999 report on the program noted a number of specific success stories, including helping 78 income-eligible people with disabilities in Madison and surrounding counties purchase homes with financial assistance in 1998-1999. The specialist also helped 177 households fund individualized housing solutions in 1996-1999, including the development of 33 units of rental housing for people with disabilities.

Another measure of the supported housing initiative's effectiveness is the increase in cooperation and coordination between the Department of Health and Family Services, local housing agencies, and housing providers. A recent success story is the partnership among a nonprofit housing organization, a nonprofit

developer, the Department of Health and Family Services, and local partners in Madison (including municipal government housing agencies) to build a mixed-income condominium complex in which 5 of the 20 units were designed and sold to households in which one member has a disability. The supported housing specialist also pointed to a new rental development project in a rural community that was specifically designed to be accessible and affordable to people with disabilities.

Contact Information

For more information about Wisconsin's housing specialist for people with disabilities, contact Marcie Brost at (608) 266-9366 or brostmm@dhfs.state.wi.us. Online information is available at <http://www.dhfs.state.wi.us/bdds/housing.htm>.

Discussion Questions:

How can a housing specialist's role assist nursing home transition programs, in which housing is a significant barrier?

Could this idea be adapted to use regional housing specialists as well as, or instead of, a statewide specialist?

This report was written by Daria Steigman of Steigman Communications. It is one of a series of reports by The MEDSTAT Group for the U.S. Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS) highlighting promising practices in home and community-based services. The entire series is available online at CMS' web site, <http://www.cms.gov>. This report is intended to share information about different approaches to offering home and community-based services. This report is not an endorsement of any practice.