

Who Let the Dogs In? A Pets Policy for a Supported Housing Organization

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This article examines the role of pets for individuals with psychiatric disorders who live in supported housing. Using a case study approach, we describe the process of consultation with an integrated, supported housing organization during the assessment, development, and implementation of a policy to allow tenants to keep pets in their apartments. Themes from interviews with adults with psychiatric disabilities who kept pets suggest that pets provide a sense of connectedness, responsibility, and emotional stability. Employees of the organization had differential views about the advisability of people with mental illness keeping pets in their apartments. Implications of our experiences for the promotion of pet ownership for people with psychiatric disorders are discussed.

Keywords: *Pets; Serious mental illness; Social policy; Supported housing*

“Keep an open mind about people with mental illness and their pets.”

—Supported housing tenant and pet owner

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This article examines issues involved in the development of pets policies for individuals with serious mental illness living in supported housing. We argue that pets provide people who have psychiatric disabilities with meaningful responsibilities and opportunities for support, social interaction, and connectedness. To provide a context for the present discussion, relevant literature on integrated supported housing and the role of pets in mental health is reviewed. We articulate potential advantages and disadvantages in allowing supported housing tenants to keep pets and draw on our experience as consultants to an integrated, supported housing organization to advocate for the systematic development of pets policies for supported housing.

SUPPORTED HOUSING FOR PEOPLE WITH SERIOUS MENTAL ILLNESS

In the past two decades, community-based services have driven many changes for people with serious mental illness, including a focus on supported housing (Carling, 1990; Feldman, 2004). The directive to help people to live in the least restrictive environments has helped supported housing to become increasingly preferred, providing an alternative to residential continuum housing (Carling, 1990; Ridgway & Zipple, 1990). Broadly defined, supported housing involves helping people with mental illness to secure independent housing in the community that is linked with flexible support services, including mental health services (Blanch, Carling, & Ridgeway, 1988; Ridgeway & Zipple, 1990). Community-based, supported housing has been shown to decrease hospitalization rates and increase residential stability and satisfaction with housing among people with serious mental illness (Hurlburt, Wood, & Hough, 1996; Newman, 2001; Rog, 2004).

Integrated, supported housing involves having a designated percentage of rental units (houses, duplexes, apartments) as supported housing for people with mental health issues and the remaining rental units available to "open market" tenants, people without identified mental health issues who can afford the rental. This type of supported housing has also been described as "housing as housing" (Hopper & Barrow, 2003; Rog, 2004). Rather than segregate people with mental illness in designated apartment houses; integrated, supported housing is thought to facilitate community integration by allowing people with mental illness to live alongside other people in the community.

PETS AND MENTAL HEALTH

Researchers have documented significant benefits associated with pet ownership, particularly for individuals with little human social support. For example, among older adults, pet ownership has been associated with decreased loneliness, maintained or increased activities of daily living, physical and emotional well-being, happiness, and improved morale (Banks & Banks, 2002; Cusack, 1988; Lago, Delaney, Miller, & Grill, 1989; Raina, Waltner-Toews, Bonnett, Woodward, & Abernathy, 1999).

Pets have also been associated with positive effects for people experiencing physical illness and other life stressors. Studies have shown that for children and adults struggling with illnesses, including cancer, cardiac disease, and AIDS, interactions with pets have resulted in self-reports of enhanced mood, greater positive affect, better adherence to cardiac rehabilitation, and decreased feelings of loneliness (Castelli, Hart, & Zasloff, 2001; Herral, Tomaka, & Medina, 2002; Kaminski, Pellino, & Wish, 2002). Well adults with pets have been found to have significantly lower heart rate and blood pressure at resting, and lower levels of reactivity when stressed than their counterparts who do not own pets (Allen, Blascovich, & Mendes, 2002). In addition, the presence of a pet may be beneficial during potentially problematic family interactions such as delivering criticism, teaching values to children, or conflict with a spouse (Tannen, 2004). Responsibility for a pet may also be beneficial. Studies of the efficacy of animal training programs on incarcerated youth and adults have shown that, due to caring for and interacting with pets, inmates have shown increases in calmness, honesty, empathy, nurturing, and social growth (Strimple, 2003).

Few empirical studies address the benefits of pet ownership for people with serious mental illness. First person accounts suggest that pets can provide safety and security, social interaction, and unconditional love to their owners (Hennings, 1999). Mental health professionals also recognize the potential value of pet ownership for their clients. Altschuler (1999) suggests that pets could be helpful in the treatment of posttraumatic stress disorder by alleviating clients' fear and anxiety and reducing the level of posttraumatic stress reactions. Siegel and colleagues (Siegel, Angulo, Detels, Wesch, & Mullen, 1999) found pets similarly beneficial in their study of depression among men diagnosed with HIV/AIDS.

PETS AND HOUSING

Despite any benefits that may result from pet ownership, it is often very difficult to have a pet if you live in a rental property. The most common reason animals are surrendered to shelters in the United States is that someone is moving to an apartment where pets are not allowed (Humane Society of the United States, n.d.b). General arguments made by landlords against allowing pets in apartments include the potential for pet-related property damage, health concerns, and liability issues from possible pet attacks (Humane Society of the United States, n.d.a). Additional concerns are common when tenants are people identified with a psychiatric disability. Sometimes concerns involve these tenants' ability to care for pets properly, particularly if tenants might need psychiatric hospitalization. Given that people with mental illness are often on restrictive budgets, the financial costs associated with pet ownership are also seen as an issue. The "pets problem" is raised frequently when people with psychiatric disabilities keep pets in violation of apartment housing policy. In such cases, individuals may become homeless if evicted for keeping pets or can experience extreme stress if forced to choose between their pets and their housing. There is evidence to suggest that people who are homeless are extremely attached to their pets and frequently refuse to accept housing if it is contingent upon giving up their pets (Kidd & Kidd, 1994).

The demands for "pet-friendly" housing and the willingness of many pet owners to pay more in rent to keep their pets are incentives for landlords to allow pets in rental properties. Recent estimates suggest that 50% of renters in the United States have pets (American Veterinary Medical Association, 1996). Landlords often recognize that some tenants are likely to keep pets, despite rules to the contrary and the danger of eviction. Having a pets policy enables landlords to exercise some control over the type and number of pets in apartments, to institute fees and/or restrictions to offset potential pet damage, and to support responsible pet ownership. Regardless of the mental health status of tenants, the issue of pet ownership for renters involves striking a balance between the rights and responsibilities of tenants and landlords. Thoughtful pets policies, when consistently enforced, can provide protections for tenants, landlords, and pets.

THE PET PROBLEM: CASE STUDY OF A SUPPORTED HOUSING ORGANIZATION

Description of the Setting

Our Place (a pseudonym to protect confidentiality) is an integrated, supported housing organization established in an Ohio city in the late 1980s. Our Place was formed as part of the "Housing as Housing" mental health initiative adopted by the Ohio Department of Mental Health (Ohio Department of Mental Health, 1997). This initiative states that "the choice to live in one's own home should not be contingent on the level and frequency of services one needs" (Ohio Department of Mental Health, 1997, p. 6)." This initiative allowed for the "unbundling" of housing and mental health service needs, including the stipulation that eviction or termination of tenancy be based on the same conditions and requirements for mental health clients as for non-mental health clients.

Our Place provides both open-market apartments and supported housing for individuals with serious mental illness. At the time of our entry into the organization, Our Place had over 600 rental units in many different types of housing throughout the city, including duplexes, four-plexes, and larger apartment complexes. About two thirds of tenants (approximately 400) identified as mental health consumers. Our Place acted as building owner, property manager, and support provider for tenants who were mental health consumers. The organization employed over 20 people, including administration, property management, maintenance, office, and housing case management staff.

Consultation Framework

Our consultation activities were guided by community collaboration, action research, and organizational empowerment principles (Fetterman & Wandersman, 2005; Jason, Keys, Suarez-Balcazar, Taylor, & Davis, 2004). The overall aim of the consultation was to help improve the quality of life for people with psychiatric disability by assisting the housing organization to better accomplish its stated goals. Our work involved: (1) the development of a role for consultants that allowed access to multiple stakeholders, (2) the systematic collection of information from tenants with mental

illness to help inform organizational policy, and (3) helping the organization to prepare for and implement change.

A Role for Consultants

Our Place administrators invited us into the organization for general technical assistance and help with a diverse set of organizational concerns. We defined our role as “community advocates” who would work with various members of the organization on a range of problems and needs identified by the agency. The name “community advocates” was intentionally chosen to signify that our primary role was to “advocate” for the “community” of tenants with mental illness served by the organization. This role allowed us to structure activities in ways that brought us into contact with all levels of organizational stake holders. Two community advocates each spent around 16 hours a week over a one-year period working on a variety of projects with agency staff and tenants who were mental health consumers. The role of community advocate allowed us to be what Herr and Anderson (2005) describes as “outsiders” working as “insiders” in an organization. We retained the expertise and objectivity of outside consultants while engaging in activities that enabled us to better understand stakeholders’ roles, duties, and opinions. In our work as “insiders,” community advocates interacted directly with tenants with mental illness and staff members, observed relationships among staff and between staff and tenants, and led meetings to discuss organizational concerns and strategies. Figure 1 illustrates relationships between community advocates and stakeholder groups.

Defining the Problem of Pets

Our Place historically had a “no pets” policy applicable to all tenants. Reasons for the “no pets” policy included concerns about the potential for property damage, potential problems between tenants, and health and cleanliness concerns. These reasons are consistent with the Humane Society’s findings regarding landlords’ concerns about issues with pets in rental units (Humane Society of the United States, n.d.a). The administration and staff of Our Place expressed additional concerns related to tenants who were consumers as pet owners, including concerns about the disposition and welfare of pets should a consumer be hospitalized or have symptom-related problems in living. At that time, Our Place allowed only three tenants to keep “emotional support animals.”

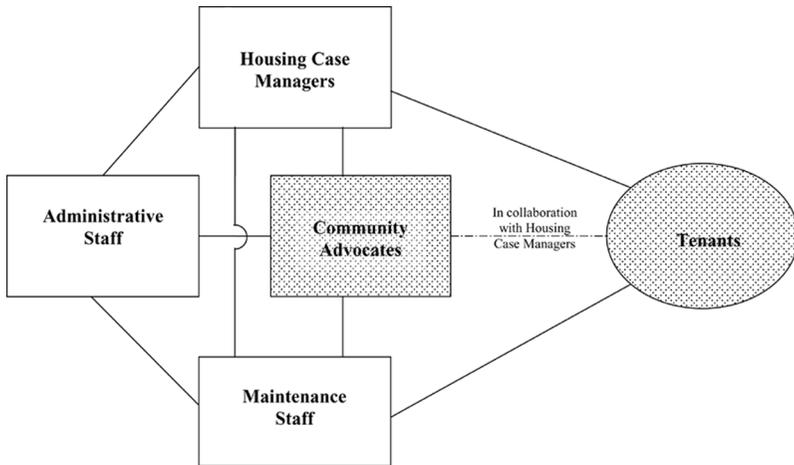


Figure 1. Framework of stakeholder relationships.

These tenants had obtained documentation certifying that the animals are necessary for their mental or physical health needs as described by the Fair Housing act relating to Americans with Disabilities (Grad vs. Royalwood Cooperative Apartments, Inc., 2005) giving these animals a different status from those considered merely “pets.”

The “no pets” policy was clearly stated in leases and other documentation signed by all tenants; however, the organization was aware, primarily through housing case managers and maintenance staff reports, that some consumer tenants were keeping pets in violation of the “no pets” policy. The organization addressed these violations inconsistently; some tenants received violation notices, while others did not. Although no tenant had been evicted for keeping an “illegal pet,” Our Place administrators wanted a way either to enforce policy and proceed with evictions as necessary or to change policy allowing pet ownership. In fact, the organization’s ambivalence regarding their “no pets” policy inevitably made the “pets problem” a divisive issue among staff members.

METHODS

Assessment of Stake Holder Views

Our role as community advocates centered on tenant-consumer advocacy, so we began this project with the assessment of the pets

issue from the perspective of consumer tenants who were pet owners. We initiated confidential, semistructured interviews with consumers currently keeping pets in their apartments. The goal was to estimate the number and types of "illegal" pets and to describe pet-related issues salient to consumers in order to begin to develop a pets policy informed by tenants' views. We then assessed the views of staff at all levels of the organization (i.e., maintenance personnel, property management, housing case managers, administrators) to better understand organizational conflict surrounding the "no pets" policy and to identify staff concerns about changes in the policy that might allow people with serious mental illness to keep pets in their apartments.

Procedure and Sample

Consumers' Views

We developed a semistructured interview for housing case managers to conduct with current pet-keeping tenants. Housing case managers conducted interviews in most cases, as they already had strong relationships with their pet-owning tenants. In addition, sufficient trust had been established between housing case managers and tenants around the issue of pets due, in large part, to the fact that housing case managers had not pushed tenants to get rid of their pet(s) or "turned them in" to management. Tenants were assured that the interview was confidential and that they would not suffer any negative repercussions (e.g., violation notices, fines) for participating in the interview. Surprisingly, most housing case managers and tenants were eager to engage in the interviews as a way of explicitly discussing the pet ownership issue. Interviews typically lasted about 45 minutes and were conducted in tenants' homes.

Of the approximately 400 consumers living in Our Place rental units, a total of 46 consumers were identified by housing staff as tenants currently keeping pets. The organization was unaware of any open market (nonconsumer) tenants who were pet owners, so only consumer tenants identified as having pets were interviewed.

Of the 46 consumers identified, a total of 44 tenants (96% of consumers identified with pets; about 7% of all consumer tenants) agreed to complete the interview. Interviews focused on tenants' reactions to the current "no pets" policy and to pet-violation notices they may have received. Descriptive information about the types of

pets kept by tenants and the quality of their care was collected along with staffs' assessments of the overall condition of these tenants' apartments.

Organizational Staff Views

Community advocates conducted informal interviews with staff at all levels of the organization, focusing on pet-related issues. Individual interviews and interviews in the context of small group meetings were conducted with a total of 12 staff members representing housing case managers, maintenance personnel, property management, and organizational administrators. Interviews included questions to solicit staff's overall views of the current "no pets" policy, issues related to the policy's current level of enforcement, and their views about the pros and cons of changing the policy to allow tenants to keep pets in their apartments.

RESULTS

Consumers' Views of Pets

The 44 tenants reported owning a total of 76 pets, including cats, dogs, mice, rats, snakes, birds, guinea pigs, ferrets, hamsters, gerbils, fish, lizards, and turtles. Although many tenants who were interviewed reported feeling fearful about keeping pets in violation of the policy, only about 16% of those interviewed had received a violation notice. Notices issued to tenants for violating the "no pets" policy proved to be distressing for tenants who received them: Jan, a 36 year-old owner of two cats, said "I cried . . . I felt like I was going to lose a child;" Mike, a 22 year-old bird owner, described feeling "shocked . . . depressed . . . like I was being picked on [by the landlord];" another tenant stated that she planned to contact a legal aid society to "fight to keep [her] cats." Clearly, tenants had strong attachments to their pets, were aware that they were putting their housing in jeopardy by keeping pets, and felt considerable distress about "getting caught" violating the "no pets" policy.

Interviews also provided important information about the impact of pets on the lives of these supported housing tenants. The use of open-ended questions such as "What would you like Our Place to know about your pet?" allowed tenants to freely share their views and stories about pet ownership. Two community

advocates separately reviewed and grouped tenants' interview responses into similar categories. Community advocates subsequently worked together to review and discuss response themes that they had generated and to resolve any discrepancies in sorting responses into categories. Advocates were then able to describe a dominant theme for each category. A theme was considered dominant if advocates agreed that each of the responses in a category related to or supported that theme. These dominant themes were used to summarize results of tenant interviews to organizational stakeholders. The same process was used to describe data from interviews with organizational staff.

"Connectedness" was a dominant interview theme. Regardless of the type of animal being kept, consumers described feeling a strong connection to their pets. For example, Joe, a 28 year-old consumer who owned parrots, said, "It is very important of people not to feel alone and isolated, and pets help you feel like you're like everyone else. Not less than other people. My birds are very important to me and I think other people with other pets feel that way, too." This sentiment is echoed by Kim, a 23 year-old consumer, "I am alone and have no family. I think it is important to take care of something else besides myself. My cats give me lots of love."

The "responsibility" of pet ownership emerged as another dominant theme. Michelle, a 31 year-old consumer, described how her dog's need for routine played an important part in her life: "My dog helps me tremendously, always there, a friend. And the everyday routine is important [to me]." As Susan, a 36 year-old cat owner, explained, "Sammy [my cat] keeps me company, constantly purring, and makes me feel secure. He depends on me. When I am suicidal, I think, 'I can't kill myself because I have to care for my cat.' Sammy is my baby. I would be thrown out of my apartment before giving up my cat."

A third theme expressed by consumers involved pets promoting "emotional stability." "I am home alone all the time and my pets help keep me calm. My cats know when I am in one of my moods," declared John, a 45 year-old consumer and owner of three mixed breed cats. Jane, a 22 year-old consumer and bird-owner, expressed a similar feeling, "I am alone most of the time and having a bird that I can talk to and confide in and nurture is a good feeling. [My bird] helps me stay calm."

These themes of connectedness, responsibility, and emotional stability articulated by consumer tenants are consistent with

research on the role of pets for older adults (Banks & Banks, 2002; Cusack, 1988; Lago et al., 1989). Moreover, interviews with tenants reflected the fundamental importance of the social role of "pet owner" to a sense of personal identity. Unlike the role of "mental health consumer," the role of "pet owner" allowed these tenants inclusion in a larger, socially-valued segment of the population. Social role theory and research suggests that adding and maintaining valued social roles, such as that of pet owner, can help individuals shape their sense of personal and social identity and are thought to play a significant part in facilitating social interactions, community integration, and a satisfying overall quality of life (Katschnig & Krautgartner, 2002; Kloos, Zimmerman, Scrimenti, & Crusto, 2002; Thomas & Wolfensberger, 1999). For people with mental illness, holding a greater number of valued social roles has been linked to reports of higher levels of well-being and less psychological symptomatology (Spreitzer, Snyder, & Larson 1980; Thoits, 1991). Conversely, being unable to enact normative social roles or meet their related life-course milestones can promote feelings of role loss, depression, and feelings of lower quality of life (Barefoot, Mortensen, Helms, Avlund, & Schroll, 2001; Faria, 1983; Stein & Wemmerus, 2001).

Organizational Staff's Views of Pets

Community advocates summarized dominant themes from their interviews with staff to better describe organizational issues regarding the pets policy. Major issues raised by organizational staff included safety concerns, tenants' ability to be pet owners, and potential benefits of tenants owning pets. In terms of safety, some staff worried that tenants or others might be bitten by pets, or become ill from pet-borne diseases. Other staff members were concerned that animals would not be properly cared for and that this would result in damage to rental units. A second, related theme concerned tenants' ability to be pet owners and manage the responsibility that accompanied pet ownership. Responses in this category included concerns about tenants' ability to care for pets, particularly in times of stress or an increase in mental health symptoms, and accepting the personal and financial responsibility of pet ownership. A third theme, "pet benefits," focused on the importance of companionship and unconditional love offered by pets to their owners. In addition to responding to advocates questions,

some staff spontaneously offered examples about the value of pets in their own life and discussed the attachment that they imagined that tenants would feel for their pets.

From our interviews, we also recognized that opinions about the merits of the current "no pets" policy and views about policy changes differed as a function of staff's position within the organization. For example, maintenance personnel seemed to have a vested interest in the current policy and most often expressed safety concerns including damage to the rental units and cleanliness of the grounds should the policy change. Property management staff concerns were largely about "tenant responsibility," fearing that if the organization had a new pets policy, tenants would not be willing to pay pet deposits or damage charges, thus causing increased collection problems. In contrast, housing case managers' responses most often reflected the "pet benefits" theme, citing companionship as a primary advantage of pet ownership. Housing case managers typically expressed the view that a new pets policy would be helpful since tenants were likely to continue to keep pets whether or not it was allowed by the organization.

Helping the Organization Prepare for and Implement Change

After considering the major issues that emerged from our assessment, administrators decided to change policy to allow tenants to keep pets in their apartments. The next steps in the consultation included helping the organization prepare for the policy change and assisting with the implementation of the new policy. In preparing for the policy change, we helped the organization to draft pet-related lease documents that were sensitive to the concerns of organizational staff and to the needs of tenants. We developed education and training for staff about the new policy and designed evaluation procedures to assess the impact of the new pets policy on tenants and staff. In terms of policy implementation, we assisted in developing procedures for tenant notification of the new pets policy, drafted educational materials for tenants interested in owning pets, and implemented evaluation procedures. Templates of the documents, forms, and assessment tools regarding the new pets policy are available at the following web address: <http://www.bgsu.edu/departments/psych/Facultyprograms.html/communityclinical.html>.

Preparing for Change

The success of the new pets policy rested upon the organizational stakeholders' willingness to embrace and enforce the new policy and the tenants' trust in the organization to implement the new policy in a fair and consistent manner. We drafted documents in consultation with lawyers from the organization, using data from the interviews with tenants and staff, and written recommendations from the Humane Society (Humane Society of the United States, n.d.c). We then met with staff from all levels of the organization, obtained their feedback, and modified documents accordingly.

The opinions, suggestions, and concerns of the staff were important to developing lease documents. For example, a housing case manager stated that several of her clients denied having pets but claimed to be temporarily keeping pets for friends or feeding stray animals, resulting in the inclusion of rules about strays and a "visiting pets" registration form. A property management employee indicated concerns about the possibility of tenants not being able to afford what property managers considered to be a reasonable pet deposit, evidencing the organization's sensitivity to tenants' financial circumstances. This discussion ultimately informed the setting of amounts for security and damage deposits for pet owners and prompted the development of a procedure allowing tenants to pay smaller monthly amounts to accrue their deposits if a lump sum payment was a hardship.

Table 1 describes the six general types of pets policy documents that include legal protections, staff and tenant education, emergency planning, and research/evaluation. Legal protection documents, developed in consultation with the organization's lawyers included (1) lease and deposit addenda, (2) forms to register pets for tenants and guests, and (3) forms to document complaints related to tenants' pets. In addition, "advance directives" forms for pets were developed. These allowed tenants to plan in advance for unexpected absences such as illness or hospitalization and, to assist staff, identified alternate pet caregivers should tenants be unable to provide pet care. The extensive pet policy forms, resources, and procedures helped both to educate and to reassure all concerned that supportive mechanisms to address pets issues were in place. It is important to note that the new pets policy applied to both consumer and open-market tenants.

The education component for organizational staff covered a variety of topics including educational information about the

TABLE 1. Pets policy documents list

Name of Document	Purpose	Description
Pet Lease and Deposit Addendums	1	Terms of pet lease agreement, required deposits, fees re: pets
Pets Registration Form	1	Basic information about pets and owner contact information
“Visiting Pet” Registration Form	1	For registration of temporary (up to 7 days) pets
Pet Problem Reports	1	Charts complaint (landlord or tenant) and documents action taken
Pets Support Form	1, 6	New pet owners: charts/rating forms for staff visits
Therapeutic/Support/Assist Animals	1, 2	Rules for animals classified as support animals (not “pets”)
Pets Policy in Brief	3	Abbreviated version of the pets policy (new tenants, case managers, etc.)
Pet Care Orientation	2, 4	Rules/regulations/general pet-care information for each type of allowed pet
Caring for Dogs, Cats and Birds	2, 4	In depth information on selection/care/safety/grooming/health & well-being of dogs, cats, birds.
“Pets Rule”: Local Resources and Suggestions about Pet Ownership	4	Local resources for low cost veterinary care and pet budgeting suggestions
Pets Bookmark	4	Reminder bookmark that outlining allowed/not allowed pet types
Checklist for Apartment Inspection	2, 4	Apartment inspection checklist for tenants who in violation of previous policy to bring them into compliance with the new policy
Pet Policy Checklist	2	Checklist for staff to insure completion of all policy documents
Decision Tree for Pet Problem Reporting	2	To guide employees through pet problem report/action steps
Advance Directives for Pet Care	5	Allow tenants to plan for unexpected absences (illness, hospitalization, etc.) and provide landlords with pet-care/contact information.
Pet Policy Evaluation	6	Forms and procedures for ongoing evaluation of pets policy

Note. 1 = Legal Protections; 2 = Staff Education; 3 = General Education; 4 = Tenant Education; 5 = Emergency Planning; 6 = Research/Evaluation. Copies of all documents including the initial assessment tool are available online at the following web address: <http://www.bgsu.edu/departments/psych/Facultyprograms.html/Communityclinical.html>

difference between animals designated as “pets” and those designated as “therapeutic/support/assist” animals and detailed information about pet care for dogs, cats, and birds. Other educational components included checklists for apartment inspection and policy compliance, and a decision tree for pet problem reporting. These documents were designed to help housing case managers and other staff better answer tenants’ questions about pet care, the pet policy, and about what Our Place expected them to do to comply with the policy. We met with staff both individually and in groups to review the components and to clarify staff responsibilities and documentation procedures regarding the pets policy. This review of policy and procedures helped staff with the implementation of the policy. In preparation for implementation, an abbreviated version of the policy was also distributed to staff at mental health agencies that worked with Our Place to allow them to better help their tenant clients.

Implementation of the Policy

Tenant notification was the first step of policy implementation. The organization required that tenants receive written notification of the policy change. During discussions about notification, case managers expressed particular concerns about notifying tenants who already had pets. They were worried that these tenants might be alarmed if they received a letter about this sensitive subject and felt that it would be most helpful to provide information about how the new policy would apply to their particular situation. Housing case managers then decided to hand-deliver letters to consumer tenants with pets and discuss the meaning of the policy change with each tenant individually. Tenants without pets, prospective tenants, and case managers from local mental health agencies also received written notification of the organization’s new pets policy. The notification letter emphasized the responsibilities and privileges of pet ownership.

Pet responsibilities and privileges were also highlighted in the tenant education documents. Integrated into the pet registration procedures, organization staff formally provided tenant education during the pets registration process and informally during interactions with tenants. A primary focus of tenant education was caring for pets. An extensive pet care orientation packet and supplemental materials were developed outlining the rules, regulations, and care suggestions about keeping particular types of pets.

Detailed information was provided about pet care, safety, and health and well-being for dogs, cats, birds, and fish (e.g., local resources for veterinarians and low-cost spay/neuter sites, care/health/safety checklists, grooming tips). These documents were designed to help tenants and staff better understand and monitor pet care, and to support them in taking constructive action for problems related to pets.

The implementation of the new pets policy also included a structure for evaluating its impact. Follow-up interviews were scheduled with all pet owners in six-month intervals. The goal of evaluation was to provide a vehicle for tenants' voice in issues concerning pets, to monitor and refine pets policy and procedures, and to document the impact of pet ownership for tenants living in supported housing. A structure for data collection and analysis was developed and part of one staff position was slated for overseeing pet-policy activities.

DISCUSSION

In this article, we examined the issues involved in developing a pets policy for individuals with serious mental illness who were living in supported housing. We defined our role in the organization as "community advocates" in a consultation framework that allowed us to both focus on tenant-consumer advocacy and work with all levels of organizational stakeholders. As community advocates, we learned "real-life" lessons about consulting with a supported housing organization on the controversial issue of pet ownership for adults coping with serious mental illness.

One of the challenges of our consultation was inherent in structuring our role: working as an "insider" while retaining our "outsider" status in the organization. Perhaps due in part to our entry into the organization at the request of administration, our role as community advocates sometimes engendered suspicion among some staff members who questioned our motives and allegiances. When administration and staff were divided on issues like the development of a pets policy, it was sometimes unclear to staff if we were "working for administration" or on "their side." In addressing this, we tried to make it clear to both administration and staff that we would take whatever "side" was consistent with our goal of helping the organization to better meet its stated

mission of providing affordable housing to people coping with mental illness.

On the other hand, our role as community advocates allowed us to amplify the voice of consumers who were pet owners during the policy deliberation process, allowing consumers' views to become a powerful instrument of change within the organization. For example, after listening to the results of interviews with consumers who were keeping pets in violation of the original policy, a number of staff began to think about these tenants differently. These staff members began to see the policy-violating tenants less as people trying to "get away with breaking the rules" and more as people who simply loved animals and were willing to risk eviction to keep them. This shift in perception then allowed staff to be more supportive of policy change and more invested in the new pets policy.

Our experience underscores the importance of having organizational ownership of policy change at multiple levels. Our consultation methods helped to minimize intraorganizational conflict and the possibility that consumer tenants might be caught between disagreeing, and unhappy organizational factions. Unfortunately, it is often easy for administrators of social service agencies to mistakenly assume that their staff is "on board" with the policy changes that they dictate. Certain policy issues may be divisive, causing organizational rancor and stress for a long time. In our example, some maintenance personnel and housing case managers were quick to focus on tenants who exemplified their concerns about pet policy implementation. Some maintenance staff, worried about property damage, found that two tenants incurred continuous, significant pet-related damage to their apartments. Some housing case managers, who felt that tenants would not be able to financially provide for pets, found pet-owning tenants who lacked funds to fulfill their lease obligations. It took time for staff to realize that there were procedures in the new policy to help them manage these feared events related to the change in policy.

Our role as community advocates allowed us to help staff to navigate a number of unanticipated events during the transition to the new policy that required thoughtful action. For example, in transitioning to the new pets policy, one consumer tenant was found to have been trying to care for a total of 12 cats in her one-bedroom apartment. This tenant's struggle prompted several meetings between the tenant and a housing case manager to find a humane way to decrease the number of cats the tenant kept.

In the end, a housing case manager located a shelter that was not full and did not euthanize healthy animals. Through her tears, the consumer helped the staff member put all but two of her cats into carriers to be taken to the shelter several counties away. The incident was emotional and poignant, symbolizing the importance of a policy that was sensitive to the needs of both people and animals.

The New Pets Policy: The Meaning of Success

Our Place administration declared the new pets policy a “total success” about 18 months after implementation. Administrators described tenants as “successful pet owners,” with “over 75% of pet owners having fulfilled at least some of their obligations,” such as providing pet deposits or proof of vaccinations for pets. Maintenance personnel and property management staff generally felt that the pets policy procedures effectively dealt with the increased potential for property damage caused by pets. Housing case managers reported that, compared with other consumer tenants, many consumers with pets appeared to experience fewer hospitalizations, reported feeling less depressed and lonely, maintained better housekeeping, and seemed more socially connected with other people who shared their interests in pets.

Unfortunately, the organization’s declaration of success contributed to their decision to discontinue further evaluation of the policy, despite the fact that the evaluation component of the new pets policy was designed to allow the policy to change and grow. Our tenure with the organization ended a few months after the implementation of the policy, and it appears that no data was obtained that allowed for a comparison of pet owners to non-pet owners or that enabled the organization to identify limitations of the new policy. By eliminating any formal evaluation, the organization missed an important opportunity to contribute to a systematic understanding of the role of pets for individuals living in supported housing.

CONCLUSION

As with any case study, there are clear limitations to the generalizability of the specifics of our consultation experience. Our level of commitment to the organization and the willingness of the

organization to support this type of “outsider as insider” consultation approach, which required access to both employees and tenants, were key elements of the consultation. Supported housing organizations are likely to differ in their motivation and desire for this approach, their comfort level in accepting feedback from consumers and staff, and their overall readiness for policy change; however, the framework for our organizational consultation, with its goal of increasing voice for people with serious mental illness on policy deliberations that directly impact their daily lives, has much greater generalizability. Moreover, the pet policies and procedures themselves provide a flexible framework that allows policy specifics to be adapted to the needs of various types of supported housing organizations. Our experiences also highlight a basic reality of change in most organizations—even simple change is often far from simple; however, we feel that the potential benefits of pet ownership for supported housing tenants and the opportunity for positive growth among staff can be incredibly worthwhile. We encourage the thoughtful development and adoption of a pets policy for organizations that provide supported housing for people with psychiatric disabilities.

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