Integrating Forensic Clients with Persistent, Chronic Mental Illnesses Back into the Community: A Retrospective Evaluation of Life Skills Training Programs Provided by the House Next Door Society’s Residential Services

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Background
Specialized support, programming, and services are required to help forensic clients (individuals with mental health problems who have been involved with the law) reintegrate into the community. This is especially true for forensic clients with severe and persistent mental illnesses, such as complex and chronic psychiatric conditions, developmental delays, traumatic brain injuries, cognitive disorders, and personality disorders. The House Next Door Society is a community-based, non-profit organization that helps this special population by supporting transitions into the community. Residents of the forensic housing program engage in activities such as skill development, recreation, medication management, and socialization.

There is a growing need for service delivery to this special population. Therefore, housing programs, like those offered through the House Next Door Society, are called upon to increase and supplement the capacity of existing forensic mental health services. These programs aim to quickly integrate individuals back into the community to reduce the negative effects on independent living skills caused by residing in a long term institution. Evaluation of the outcomes of these programs and services will help to identify gaps that impede successful reintegration.

Objectives
Conduct an evaluation of the House Next Door Society’s forensic housing program with the following objectives:

1. Determine the effectiveness of community reintegration and life-skills training programs offered by the society.
2. Identify current and future housing and resource needs of the society to continue to provide services to this complex population.

Method
The evaluation used both qualitative and quantitative research methods, and was made up of the following components:

1. Systematic program review: Program strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats that could impact service delivery were analyzed. This information was used to demonstrate program components and achievements to stakeholders and partner agencies.
2. Site documentation review: Previously collected client data were reviewed, including information about length of stay in the program, life skills development, and options for activities and housing after completion of the program.
3. Interviews and focus groups: Participants included staff from the House Next Door Society and Alberta Health Services, as well as current and past residents of the society’s forensic housing program. Open-ended questions were asked, and sessions were transcribed and analyzed for commonly-occurring themes.
Results
Participants identified several strengths of the House Next Door Society's program, such as:

- The program feels homey, and has an atmosphere of trust, respect, and acceptance of everyone regardless of level of functioning. Staff and residents feel like they are part of a family.
- Communication between Alberta Health Services, managers, staff, and residents is strong and effective.
- Staff encourage residents to accept their mental illnesses, and provide mentoring and leadership.
- Staff receive lots of internal training.
- Residents can speak openly with staff, and feel that staff are respectful of cultural diversity. Residents feel that staff are committed to the program.
- The transitional nature of the program serves as an intermediate step between a hospital setting and transitional housing.
- Having an emergency bed available for crisis situations is a great resource.

Participants identified several challenges faced by the program, such as:

- Lack of funding for expansion is a barrier to improving facilities and services.
- Some of the clients require a long time to reintegrate into the community (ranging from months to years, or decades). This is because many of the residents of the program need time to learn new skills, build self confidence and self esteem, gain control over medical and mental health concerns, learn new habits and routines, and achieve new developmental milestones.
- Staff feel there are potential safety issues involved with working alone.
- The local community may not be accepting of the population served by the House Next Door Society.

Participants also identified gaps in the program’s service provision, such as:

- There is little service provision to the First Nations population or other cultural minorities.
- There are not enough resources to support a fully comprehensive transition into the community.
- Some residents are slow to move to transitional houses, and there is not enough funding to provide more housing opportunities.

Conclusions
Findings suggest that the House Next Door Society’s forensic housing program provides effective transitional services to the community. Focus group participants commented on the positive qualities of the House Next Door Society’s forensic housing program, especially the fact that residents who complete the program tend to have good outcomes. However, participants also identified limited funding as a challenge to the current program. Increased funding would provide additional resources, such as more facilities, programs, staff, and staff training.

There is little research about what makes programming successful for this unique forensic client population. Future research will examine strategies for teaching life skills to these clients and how to incorporate career support into the current program. Methods to support staff learning will be examined, in addition to exploring the use of mobile technologies to support service provision and staff safety.

Lessons Learned
Providing different levels of housing is a critical component to client success. In order for housing programs to enable strong relationships between clients and staff, they must be small and feel homey. Also, skill teaching should be tailored to the needs of individual clients. Finally, staff require continuous education.

The full report can be found at www.mentalhealthresearch.ca.

About the Author: Elizabeth Taylor is an Associate Professor and Associate Dean in the Faculty of Rehabilitation Medicine at the University of Alberta. She is an occupational therapist, and has worked in the community as an advocate with the goal of researching and building effective community programs for those with severe persistent mental health issues.