

'Communal Living Program to Re-enter Society After Substance Abuse: The Oxford House Model'

Building Community for Safe and Sober Living

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Under modern managed care, private and public sector facilities have reduced their services dramatically; thus, there is a tremendous need to develop and evaluate lower cost, residential, non-medical, community-based care options for people with histories of substance addiction. Oxford House is a network of over 1,100 recovery homes nationwide that can facilitate abstinence through peer social support. Oxford House, founded in 1975, illustrates a community-based approach toward abstinence. Unlike traditional hospital care where trained professionals are necessary, or therapeutic communities where residents have a maximum length of stay, Oxford House offers a community where residents can live without the involvement of professional treatment staff and where there are no time restrictions on length of stay. Similar to Alcoholics Anonymous, members of an Oxford House receive support from peers; however, unlike mutual help groups there is no single, set course for recovery that all members must follow. In short, an Oxford House experience may provide residents with peers who can 'teach' effective coping skills, and be resources for information on how to maintain successful community reintegration and abstinence.

Given the importance of this large, national, alternative network of houses for communal living, from a public policy perspective, it has been important to rigorously evaluate the effectiveness of Oxford Houses. Background research and two recent NIH-funded evaluations conducted at DePaul University will be presented, one involving 150 individuals randomly assigned to Oxford House versus regular aftercare and followed for two years, and a second study that involved repeated interviews over a year for a large national sample of Oxford House. Both studies indicate that supportive communal after-care settings, such as Oxford Houses, have a critical role to play in reducing recidivism for individuals with substance use disorders.