

GAINING COMMUNITY ALLIES

Solutions for Treatment Expansion Project (STEP)

*A Guide to
Building Support
for a Residential
Alcohol and
Drug Treatment
Facility*



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This booklet is one in a series of four guides to establishing an alcohol and drug treatment facility in a community. The publications were developed by the Solutions for Treatment Expansion Project of the Institute for Public Strategies. Funding and support were provided by the County of San Diego Health and Human Services Agency, Alcohol and Drug Services.

To request additional copies of booklets in this series, or for more information, call (619) 474-8844, e-mail info@publicstrategies.org or write to IPS at 148 E 30th St., Suite B, National City, CA 91950. The booklets can also be viewed and downloaded at www.publicstrategies.org.



Introduction

ALCOHOL AND DRUG TREATMENT CENTERS SHOULD FOCUS ON BEING THE BEST neighbors they can possibly be. That might sound easy — after all, treatment facilities are known to fit harmoniously into their communities. But in order to have the chance to be good neighbors, proponents of a new facility must build allies and reduce opposition in order to gain approval for their project.

This booklet is part of a series of guides to community change that address the elements in siting an alcohol and drug treatment facility in a community. It's designed to demystify the process for individuals and groups working toward that goal, outlining the steps of organizing an alliance of supporters.

The guides are based on the four integrated components of the Environmental Change Model: applied research and data collection, which includes the research, assessment and planning essential in developing an overall strategy ("Community Zoning"); defined policy, which drives the process to create community change ("The Political Process"); community organizing, the effort to build support among community members and organizations ("Gaining Community Allies"); and media advocacy, a tool used to elevate the issue on the public agenda through the use of data, authentic spokespersons and clear, consistent messaging ("Media Access and Advocacy").

A thorough planning process will help you decide whether to take on a task, how it should be done and when to implement the actions that will lead to your goal. Each of the supporting strategies should be aligned with the goal of siting a residential treatment facility. Therefore, the plan needs to be flexible, timely and woven into the fabric of the overall plan to maximize results.

Where the Community Fits In

ALTHOUGH A MAJORITY OF CALIFORNIANS APPROVED PROPOSITION 36, A referendum that provides for treatment in lieu of incarceration for nonviolent drug offenses, the siting of

residential treatment facilities continues to muster strong local opposition.

In this phenomenon — often called “NIMBY,” or “Not in My Back Yard” — individuals and communities state that while they want services available, they do not want them close by. It’s exacerbated when policy-makers listen *only* to a small group of nay-sayers in deciding the location of a residential treatment center.

This problem is not limited to challenges siting alcohol and drug treatment facilities. It’s pervasive in many other areas of health and human services, like hospices and shelters for battered women and the homeless. The concepts outlined in this booklet are adaptable for use by other organizations facing similar siting issues. Establishing partnerships these other human service organizations can build broad support to address the NIMBY problem on a regional basis.

The NIMBY syndrome is based on fear — usually fear of the unknown, as in: How will a treatment facility change our neighborhood? What

effect will it have on property values? Will crime and drug use increase with recovering addicts living in the community? Will noise and traffic increase? Such preconceptions are driven by emotions rather than fact. This publication will provide suggestions and tools that can help to reduce a community’s fears about the placement of a treatment facility in their neighborhood.

How do you reduce NIMBYism? You must have approval of the location for your treatment facility from the local planning department and possibly the City Council. (See the “Community Zoning” booklet for details.) A residential alcohol and drug treatment facility should be perceived as a good neighbor well before you begin the permit process. The steps outlined in this

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booklet might seem like common sense, and you might already be doing some of them, but it's important to think strategically when developing and implementing your plan.

Building Support

THE BENEFITS OF HAVING A RESIDENTIAL TREATMENT FACILITY AS A NEIGHBOR can be promoted to help overcome the fears of community members. Research on existing treatment facilities in San Diego County shows that they are among the best-kept buildings in their neighborhood — and actually stabilize property values. As drug-free islands of sobriety, they also include a strong neighborhood watch component and contribute to neighborhood maintenance.

Licensed treatment facilities are closely regulated, requiring standards for staffing ratios and supervision and abstinence from alcohol and drug use. They're prohibited by regulation from being a neighborhood nuisance, and noncompliant participants are immediately removed. Licensed facilities are also held to a high community standard and are backed by public oversight.

The more effective you are in developing active, vocal community support for your facility, the better you will be able to gain political momentum, combat the opposition and attract the media to help your goal. Creating an advisory group of staff and key stakeholders from the community, business and law enforcement is essential to any community strategy. Members of this group should become knowledgeable about the services your organization provides — as well as understand the treatment process and the obstacles faced in siting a facility. They should understand the attitudes and politics of the community and should be willing to speak out in support of your organization.

Members of the advisory group should be identified as spokespersons to present a clear and concise message to the media when appropriate. They may be called on to author a newspaper op-ed or respond with a letter to the editor in support of your issue. Community organizing should be closely integrated with the media plan to coordinate the most appropriate time to

seek print and television coverage. (For more information on how to incorporate an effective media response into your campaign, see “Accessing the Media.”)

Plan Ahead to Get Ahead

YOUR GROUP SHOULD BUILD BROAD SUPPORT FOR THE SITING OF A residential treatment center *prior* to conducting your neighborhood outreach campaign and talking to known opponents. Establishing community support will reduce the chance of getting distracted by and merely reactive to the opposition. Identify, contact and invite other diverse community stakeholders to learn about the benefits of providing treatment locally — and then engage them to support the process. Develop a plan to recruit supporters and establish their roles. You’ll need to give them background information on your agency, arrange tours of yours or others’ facilities and develop an information distribution system to keep them abreast.

A mechanism should also be established to mobilize supporters quickly during critical times in the campaign. These might include newsmaking opportunities, public hearings or community forums. Appreciation and encouragement can go a long way toward maintaining volunteer commitment and support over time.

Members of the advisory group should include neighborhood leaders, who can in turn be liaisons to the community. It’s important for the community to see the program as serving *them* rather than as something from “the outside.” The advisory group should be responsible for ensuring that the residential treatment facility is responsive to community needs. It can be a conduit to resolve concerns and complaints generated from the neighborhood.

Give your outreach staff and volunteers specific information to address the legitimate concerns that will arise. Train them to conduct a positive presentation emphasizing how a residential treatment facility can be a neighborhood asset.

In conducting neighborhood outreach, avoid large community meetings. The last thing you want to do is provide an opportunity

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or event for the opposition to organize. Types of community outreach to consider include:

- Going door-to-door in the neighborhood
- Planning an “open house” at one of your facilities or another residential treatment facility in operation
- Arranging a small house meeting in the neighborhood
- Coordinating a positive feature article in a local paper or magazine

- Distributing information packets on your program, including specific protocols and procedures

It is imperative to understand *why* residents oppose the siting of a treatment facility in their neighborhood in order to craft the most appropriate response. Community outreach is a chance to engage residents to work through their fears. Their concerns will be best addressed with an issue-based strategy: effective responses should be developed for each issue to reduce the power of opposition’s argument. When the issue debate is compromised, you are left with angry neighbors without a defense for their position.

Good Neighbor Guidelines

MOST TREATMENT PROGRAMS ARE GOOD AT PROVIDING SERVICES TO THEIR clients but less experienced at marketing themselves as beneficial to the community. Unless you’re able to convince residents that you will be an asset to the neighborhood, you might never have the chance to demonstrate what a good neighbor you can be.

When a treatment facility is proposed in a neighborhood, residents often have preconceptions that trouble — for example, drug use

as illustrated in the media — is on the horizon. To the contrary, established treatment facilities have a proven track record of being great neighbors and strong community partners. Their stories just don't often appear on the evening news or in the paper.

Being a good neighbor should begin long before moving in. Adopting a set of "Good Neighbor Guidelines" will help you dispel neighbor's fears.

Early in the process of siting a facility, develop an introduction letter along with other printed information that can be made available to residents in your new neighborhood. Illustrate the services and accomplishments of your organization and how your program helps the community.

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Negative preconceptions can often be overcome with thoughtful, targeted public relations and communication practices — which should be part of the community outreach strategy. A comprehensive communication strategy can reduce opposition as well as build support for the conditional use permit (CUP) required to site your facility.

For example, invite neighbors to visit the facility and to attend activities there. Encourage staff to visit neighbors periodically asking if there are any concerns. Distribute information on your organization and its successes, and be available to answer questions from neighbors. Act as the welcome wagon when new people move in. Inform the neighborhood of any changes or improvements you are planning — and be prepared to respond to any inconvenience this may cause.

Resolving and Preventing Conflicts

YOUR “GOOD NEIGHBOR GUIDELINES” SHOULD INCLUDE DEVELOPING A proactive stance in working with local police and emergency response agencies. Why wait until a problem arises to make your presence known to the community?

You can improve communication with local authorities by conducting an orientation for the police and fire departments; discussing confidentiality requirements of treatment program; inviting city representatives to visit your facility; providing police and other departments with information on your organization; including law enforcement participation on your advisory board; and creating protocols for the facility to reduce the need for emergency response calls.

Conflict resolution should be a top priority for all residential treatment facilities. Resolving a problem before it escalates to a crisis will go a long way in preserving positive relationships. A written protocol system for complaints provides a mechanism to solve many problems in a timely and often equitable manner. Inform neighbors of your plan to address problems during the outreach process. This should help to alleviate their fear that problems will go unresolved.

You might also want to create a neighborhood committee or a subcommittee of the advisory group, including community members and assigned staff. This committee could anticipate potential problems and resolve problems that do arise.

In addition, train assigned staff and community representatives in mediation and crisis intervention. Establish for key administrators and the advisory board a notification process for all complaints. Overall, respond quickly to issues deemed the responsibility of the facility, and take steps to prevent future problems.

Resident Conduct and Facility Maintenance

THE BEHAVIOR OF RESIDENTS REFLECTS ON AN ENTIRE TREATMENT FACILITY. IT IS your responsibility to promote good-neighborly behavior even before applying for a conditional use permit. Develop house rules that will build respect for the neighborhood and the facility. Such rules should be spelled out to avoid any confusion when new residents enter the program.

Prior to moving into the community, discuss the list of client rules with neighbors to identify and avoid potential problems. Specializing the rules for a specific community shows that you respect your neighbors. Rules should be posted in the reception area of the facility for all guests to observe. In addition, meaningful consequences for violating the rules should be understood and consistency enforced by staff.

All residential alcohol and drug treatment facilities have employment guidelines and staff expectations based on their positions within the organization. It is worthwhile to inform your neighbors of these rules and expectations during outreach. Explain how staff at the residential treatment facility can be positive role models to residents and the community. Neighbors should know that the facility mandates compliance with an established code of ethics for all staff. Provide training for staff and volunteers on confidentiality regulations. All rules of the facility must apply to staff as well as residents.

In addition to the behavior of program residents, one of the major concerns of neighbors is the impact of a treatment center on property value. Your facility can reduce this fear by maintaining its property to the neighborhood standard in landscaping, painting and design. While conducting your outreach activities, the expectations of the neighbors should be explored and a maintenance plan designed to meet the requirements.

Actually, setting a higher standard should be the norm. The treatment facility should aspire to be a neighborhood showplace. Establish a maintenance schedule for staff and residents, and

acknowledge exemplary work. Standard house rules for property maintenance should be developed, monitored and enforced.

With rules and regulations detailed in advance, they can be part of a comprehensive outreach package to present before a treatment facility is built and while it is in service. Possible elements include:

- Letter of introduction
- Complaint protocols
- Code of ethics
- House rules
- Staff requirements
- Advisory council and staff contact information
- Facility maintenance plan

Community Service

INVOLVEMENT IN LOCAL SERVICE PROJECTS IS A GREAT WAY FOR YOUR STAFF AND residents to become involved in community affairs. Participants can be encouraged to join groups like the neighborhood watch program, the neighborhood association, volunteer police or fire departments, the chamber of commerce and local fraternal organizations. This will reinforce your facility's status as an active member of the community concerned with its improvement.

Have volunteers or staff conduct a community assessment to identify specific service opportunities. For example, are there disabled or elderly neighbors who could use help with their trash or yard work? Or establish a monthly community clean-up day when residents of the facility come together with neighbors to pick up trash, sweep the streets and establish a spirit of cooperation in the neighborhood. Volunteer for special events sponsored by the neighborhood. Support local fundraising programs, and purchase goods from local merchants. If graffiti appears in the neighborhood, develop a plan to remove it and an attitude that it will not be tolerated.

Be inventive, and present community improvement ideas to the neighborhood association. Action speaks louder than words, so pitch in to help the neighbors implement the change. Be seen, be active — and be a good neighbor.



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