



DEPARTMENT OF
ECONOMIC SECURITY

Division of Developmental Disabilities

A photograph of two women laughing together outdoors, overlaid with a blue tint. The woman on the left has long blonde hair and is wearing a floral top. The woman on the right has long dark hair and is wearing a light-colored top. They are both smiling and looking towards each other.

Guidelines for Building Positive Neighborhood Relationships

A Practical Approach for Licensed Group Homes

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Mission Statement

The Division of Developmental Disabilities (DDD) empowers Arizonians with developmental disabilities to lead self-directed, healthy and meaningful lives.

Acknowledgements

This guidebook owes a large debt to The California Association of Services of Children (CSC) and the California Association of Children's Homes (CCH). Most of what is presented here was developed originally by these offices. As the primary author of the Arizona edition, I wish to acknowledge their excellent work and thank them for permission to extract and adapt sections from their guidebook. The professionalism and practicality of their guidebook helped inspire the Division of Developmental Disabilities to follow their lead.

- *Kathi Shoosmith*

Former Manager of Program Monitoring, Arizona Department of Economic Security, Division of Developmental Disabilities

Endorsements

This guidebook has been reviewed and endorsed by the following organizations:

- The Arc of Arizona
- The Governor's Council on Developmental Disabilities
- The Developmental Disabilities Advisory Council
- Arizona Association of Providers for Persons with Disabilities

Introduction

Arizona has approximately 1200 group homes serving children and adults in out of home care. Most of these of these homes are in the Phoenix, Tucson, and Flagstaff metro areas and are located in residential neighborhoods. It's not unusual for members of the community to have negative preconceived ideas related to group homes. A few neighbors may have previously experienced an unpleasant situation that was not satisfactorily resolved. Others may have been influenced by negative images portrayed in the media. For many, it may just be a fear of the unknown. This booklet contains ideas, suggestions and tips for building positive relationships in the community.

The intent of this booklet is to share effective strategies in helping communities to recognize and accept group home residents as valued neighbors. The guidelines provided in this booklet are voluntary and are sincerely intended to facilitate and advance the acceptance of people with disabilities living in their own homes throughout the community. We hope that you review these suggestions and consider incorporating them into your program's best practices.

Steps to Take Before Moving In

We've all heard the saying, "you never get a second chance to make a good first impression." Be proactive in making a good first impression before moving into a neighborhood. It is recommended that the provider share printed materials about their program with the neighbors.

Among these materials include the name and telephone number of an emergency contact person or a community liaison from within your agency. The contact person should be someone who is familiar with the home and who is in a position to take action and respond quickly to concerns. A sample letter of introduction is available at the end of this booklet, along with a sample protocol for responding to neighbors' concerns.

Maintenance & Upkeep

The appearance of a home is often considered a direct reflection of every aspect of the program (by neighbors, licensing inspectors, case workers, etc.). One of the most effective ways to make a positive impression on the neighbors is to maintain and improve upon the appearance of your property. This can also positively impact the feeling of pride that residents and staff have regarding the setting. Here are a few ideas to keep the property well maintained and making a positive impression:

- Adhere to community, neighborhood, and homeowner association standards for landscaping, painting, and upkeep.
- If the garbage is collected at the curb, move or remove the receptacle within city guidelines (there is typically a 12-hour window).
- If the receptacle is routinely filled to capacity, you may be able to request and obtain an additional container from the city before overflowing becomes a problem.
- Implement a maintenance schedule for watering, mowing, raking, weeding, and pruning, depending on the type of landscaping.
- Encourage staff and residents to take on special projects to beautify the home. Making a wreath for the front door, hanging a flag on national holidays, and planting a flowerbed are all activities that benefit both the home and its neighbors.
- Conduct self-monitoring visits and inspections of settings and reward homes that are the most attractive.

Personal & Professional Conduct

The following rules of conduct should be followed by anyone who wants to be viewed as a good neighbor – not just individuals living and working in group homes.

- See the neighbors and let them see you. Make it a practice to wave and say hi.
- Go for walks in the neighborhood.
- Follow basic rules for pedestrian safety (cross at corners and marked crosswalks, use sidewalks when available, etc.). Avoid taking shortcuts across a neighbor's yard or through the alley.

- Help to keep the neighborhood clean by keeping trash (including cigarette butts) properly contained.
- If the home has a designated outdoor smoking area, choose an area that is discreet and that will have minimal impact on the neighbors.
- Keep noise at a reasonable and considerate level, especially during the early morning and evening hours.
- Observe all vehicle safety and driving laws. The speed limit in most residential neighborhoods is 25 mph.
- Be aware of available parking in the neighborhood. Whenever possible, use the garage and driveway to park the vehicles used for the home and by staff.
- If the home has a dog, adhere to all leash and immunization laws and be aware of excessive barking. Be sure to clean up after your pet!
- If the home has a cat, most humane associations agree that the animal should be kept indoors (this is safer for the cat and is usually a relief to the neighbors).
- Treat neighbors with courtesy and respect. The attitude of the staff toward the neighbors sets the tone for the attitude of the residents. In the unlikely event that a neighbor openly expresses hostility, you will be more likely to calm the situation with kindness and civility.

Handling Complaints

Take all complaints seriously. Verbally respond as soon as possible to the person with the complaint and follow up in writing. Failure to be responsive to complaints will usually result in the need for the complainant to find an audience elsewhere. If it's not you, it will be other neighbors, the local government, the media, or licensing. You will contribute to building a positive relationship with your neighbors if you take the first opportunity to respond directly to their concerns. Consider the following procedures for receiving and addressing complaints:

- Provide neighbors with the information they need to bring complaints, concerns, or questions to your attention (see the sample letter of introduction at the end of this booklet).
- Train direct line staff on the actions to take if or when a complaint is received (see sample protocol at the end of this booklet).
- Designate someone to serve as a community liaison. While direct line staff can do immediate intervention, forwarding the complaint to your liaison will allow for follow-up and help to ensure a consistent and professional response.
- Keep your Board of Directors informed about significant complaints. The Board is an excellent resource for working with the community. By keeping the Board apprised, you will avoid blindsiding the board with issues that may find their way into the media or a lawsuit.

Law Enforcement

Maintain a positive working relationship with local law enforcement, as well as with other local emergency response teams. Be proactive in gaining their understanding and support.

- Invite the police officers on the home's beat to visit for the purpose of meeting residents and staff. If you ever have to call them for assistance, it is important that the police have a positive understanding of the program and the residents. In exchange, the visit will allow residents and staff to experience the police in a positive and non-threatening situation.
- Consider recruiting a police officer for your Board of Directors or as a volunteer to spend time with the residents.
- Develop emergency intervention plans and systems of support within your agency to minimize reliance on law enforcement in crisis situations.
- If one or more resident of the home could present a risk in regard to evacuation, provide the local fire department with the location of the home and a description of the delays that may be encountered in the event of an emergency. In addition to providing the home with technical assistance to expedite evacuation, the fire department will often "red flag" the location of the home in their records to help ensure an extra speedy response.
- Provide individual instruction for each resident on appropriate interactions with law enforcement/fire/emergency personnel. This type of advance preparation can better equip residents to interact appropriately and safely in a crisis and may help to instill a sense of respect for emergency personnel.

Confidentiality

Neighbors may express natural curiosity about the staff and residents of the home. Balanced with efforts to assist residents to fit into the community is the responsibility the provider has to protect each resident's right to confidentiality. The following information is confidential and may not be shared with neighbors without the consent of the person's legally responsible designee and, in some cases, the court:

- The last name of a person residing in the home.
- The specific reason for a person's placement in the home.
- A person's diagnosis.
- A person's current health status.
- A person's medical/psychological/social history.
- A person's criminal history.
- Any personally identifiable information.

Public Relations & Community Service

Public relations are important to communicating your mission; community service is a wonderful opportunity to demonstrate your commitment to the neighborhood. Consider some of the following approaches:

- Invite the neighbors over. Hold an open house around the holidays or invite them to a barbecue. Don't violate confidentiality but show off your program and what the residents have achieved. Inviting neighbors in may help to reduce the mystery and negative assumptions about what goes on inside the home and it may help the neighbors to view the residents as...well, neighbors.

- When a new family moves into the neighborhood, make them feel welcome. Take the new neighbors a plate of cookies, a letter of introduction, and information on your program.
- Participate in the neighborhood watch program. If there isn't already one in place you may be able to initiate one by contacting your local police department.
- Help clean up the neighborhood in the aftermath of storms, or other natural disasters.
- Participate in the adopt-a-highway program. This has the dual benefit of increasing the residents' and staffs' commitment to the community and placing the name of the provider in a positive context.
- Participate in community events and programs, including parks & recreation classes, visiting the library, and attending arts & crafts programs.
- Invest in the community. When possible, shop at stores in the neighborhood.
- Join and participate in your neighborhood association.
- Encourage all agency administrators, staff, and residents to become involved in community organizations (e.g., volunteering for charitable causes, joining a local scouting organization, attending city council meetings, etc.).

Regulations & Policies

Licensing and monitoring regulations do not specifically require group homes to be good neighbors, however, the rules and statutes are often introduced in direct response to concerns expressed by the community. The following rules and statutes impact the operation of group homes and other community-based program serving individuals with disabilities.

- Individuals residing in group homes have a right to privacy. Personal information should not be released without the consent of the individual and the legal guardian (if applicable). Arizona Revised Statutes (ARS §8-542) specify the restrictions surrounding the release of confidential information. Basically, the statute restricts the sharing of personal information to those with a "need to know." In other words, the direct line staff in the home may have a need to know information regarding a resident's health, and certainly the primary care physician would have a need to know such information, however, a neighbor would not.
- Arizona Revised Statutes (ARS §8-504) and Arizona Administrative Code (A.A.C. R9-33-201 TO 207) require that homes contracted for services by the Division of Developmental Disabilities be licensed for health and safety of the facility by the Department of Health Services (DHS). In order for a group home to be licensed by DHS, an inspection of health and safety requirements must be completed with 100% compliance. Licensing requirements include, but are not limited to, the successful completion of an annual fire inspection, safe and functioning systems for plumbing and electricity, an evacuation plan specific to the setting, and properly enclosed swimming pools.
- The Arizona Administrative Code (A.A.C. R6-6-803.A) requires the provider to notify the Division when a resident of a licensed home is determined to be missing. In addition, the rule requires each home to have and implement an emergency procedure that includes protocol in response to missing persons.

- The Arizona Administrative Code (A.A.C. R6-6-803.A) requires the provider to notify the Division of Developmental Disabilities of any community complaint made regarding the group home or resident of the home. This notification must occur within 24 hours of the original complaint being made. If a neighbor complains to the staff or other representative of the agency, in addition to handling the situation with the neighbor the providers must ensure that the Division is promptly notified. The Division, in turn, is required to investigate all complaints within 10 calendar days.
- Amendments made in the 1988 to the Federal Fair Housing Act prohibit cities and communities from imposing regulations, zoning codes, policies serving individuals with disabilities differently than homes for residents without disabilities.

In Summary

- Be proactive in establishing positive relationships with the neighbors.
- Maintain high standards for the appearance and operation of the licensed home.
- Actively contribute to the overall appearance of the neighborhood.
- Participate in community activities.
- Provide prompt, personal, and professional intervention when or if problems arise.

Sample: Letter of Introduction

Dear Neighbor,

I would like to take this opportunity to introduce myself. My name is Jane Smith, and I am the Director of Residential Supports for AAA Residential Services. AAA Residential Services has been incorporated as a non-profit organization since 1988, and it is our mission to assist the residents of our group homes in achieving personal satisfaction as members of the community.

In all of our homes, we have staff on duty whenever one or more resident is present. Each staff is screened for criminal history and is required to complete a mandatory training program. Our staff receive training on the skill and needs of the residents as well as CPR, First Aid and emergency procedures.

We are licensed as a group home to serve individuals with developmental disabilities by the Arizona Department of Health Services. For more information on the status of our license, please contact Bureau of Special Licensing at (602) 364-2536. In addition, we are monitored every six months by the Arizona Department of Economic Security, Division of Developmental Disabilities, to ensure that the services we are offering to our residents are appropriate. For more information on our program monitoring, please call (602) 542-2550.

By living in neighborhoods such as yours, our residents are given an opportunity to exercise their legal right to live throughout our community. We take this responsibility very seriously, just as we do being your neighbor. I would like to stress to you the importance we at AAA Residential Services place on being a good neighbor and an asset to the community. If you have any feedback about things you see at our home, please feel free to knock on the door and inform the on-duty staff.

I welcome your telephone call if you would prefer to speak to me directly or if you have any questions, comments, or concerns about our home. I can be reached at (602) 555-2222. Thank you for your interest.

Sincerely,

Jane Smith

Director of Residential Supports

Sample: Responding to a Neighbor's Concerns

MEMO

To: All Residential Staff

From: Jane Smith, Director of Residential Supports

Subject: Answering Questions and Resolving Complaints

It is our mission at AAA Residential Services to work in positive partnership with the community to provide a safe, healthy, and nurturing environment for people with disabilities. Should anyone in the neighborhood contact us with a question, concern, or complaint, we at AAA Residential Services will do everything we can to provide answers and resolutions by following this protocol:

1. You are allowed to let them know this is a group home for individuals with disabilities and it is operated by AAA Residential Services. You NOT allowed to give them any specific information about our residents. If they ask, you may give them your name.
2. If you can resolve a neighbor's complaint or satisfactorily answer a neighbor's question, please do so promptly and with sincere courtesy. Please relay this interaction to me by the end of your shift.
3. If you cannot answer the question or resolve the complaint, please let the neighbor know that the community liaison for AAA Residential Services will follow up with them within 24 hours and politely request the neighbor's name and telephone number. Before the end of your shift, please ensure that details of the neighbor's question or complaint have been relayed to me.
4. Offer the neighbor a copy of the Letter of Introduction and let them know they are welcomed to contact me for more information. My telephone number is on the letter.
5. When you have made an attempt to resolve the issue and, as appropriate, referred the neighbor to me as the community liaison, politely excuse yourself, letting the neighbor know you need to return to your duties. Please do not participate in a debate or argument with the neighbor about the validity of a complaint.
6. In the unlikely event that the neighbor expresses hostility, please call me at (602) 555-3333.
7. If at any point you feel the situation has escalated beyond what is safe, immediately follow emergency procedures and call 911.



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