



Guidelines for Building Positive Neighborhood Relationships

**A Practical Approach for
Licensed Child Welfare Homes**



**Arizona Department of Economic Security
Office of
Licensing, Certification & Regulation
Child Welfare Licensing**



Mission Statement

The Office of Licensing, Certification & Regulation is committed to protecting the health, safety, and well-being of children and vulnerable adults receiving care or supports in DES regulated programs. Protection will be delivered through the development, promotion, assessment, and enforcement of relevant regulations.

Child Welfare Licensing (CWL) Vision

◆ Delivery of Quality Services

CWL will deliver quality services to our customers. CWL will enforce regulatory compliance, guided by best practices and continuous process improvements that eliminate duplication, void inconsistencies, and establish standardization.

◆ Relationships with Customers

CWL will value our customers by building successful partnerships, maximizing diversity, communicating with respect, fulfilling commitments and participating in mutual accountability for the common goal of promoting the safety and well-being of children.

◆ Communication

CWL will communicate with respect, exemplifying trust and honesty as a mechanism to communicate clearly, openly and with responsiveness. CWL will recognize the value of decision making involving all levels, measurement, teamwork and quality work performance.





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Introduction

The Mission of Child Welfare Licensing (CWL) in the Department of Economic Security is dedicated to protecting and promoting the safety and well-being of children in out-of-home care. These children have typically been removed from their custodial homes due to neglect, abuse, or abandonment. CWL supports the placement of these children in safe and structured homes based in the community. The community, however, may express resistance to the operation of such homes. It may be necessary, and it is certainly wise, for residential care providers to take a proactive approach to building positive relationships with the community to help ensure successful integration.

Arizona has approximately 200 group homes and shelter homes serving children 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 or shelter 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 homes and shelter homes as valued neighbors. The guidelines provided in this booklet are voluntary and are sincerely intended to facilitate and advance the acceptance of children who have been placed outside their custodial homes into group homes and shelter homes. We hope that you will take these suggestions to heart and think seriously about 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 care 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 help the home look good and make 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 and shelter 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 to find a listener 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 child's legally responsible person and, in some cases, the court:

- ❖ The last name of a child residing in the home.
- ❖ The last names of a child's family members.
- ❖ The specific reason for a child's placement in the home.
- ❖ A child's diagnosis.
- ❖ A child's current health status.
- ❖ A child's medical/psychological/social history.
- ❖ A child's criminal history.
- ❖ The criminal history of a child's family.
- ❖ 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 children 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 regulations do not specifically require group homes and shelter homes to be good neighbors, however, the legislature often considers new regulations in direct response to concerns expressed by the community. As an example, legislation introduced in response to community complaints resulted in the adoption of ARS §36-1201 and the creation of a central registry identifying all licensed group homes serving more than four minors.

The following statutes and rules impact the operation of group homes and shelter homes based in community.

- ❖ The Arizona Administrative Code (A.A.C.) Title 6, Chapter 5, Article 74 contains the administrative rules for the licensure of group homes, shelter homes, and outdoor experience programs.
- ❖ Arizona Revised Statutes (ARS §8-504) and the Arizona Administrative Code (A.A.C. R6-5-7404.A.3) require that homes licensed for child welfare services be inspected for health and safety of the home by the Department of Health Services. 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.
- ❖ Individuals residing in licensed homes have a right to privacy (as we all do!). Personal information may not be released without the consent of the legal guardian or, as applicable, the courts. 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 child’s health, and certainly the primary care physician would have a need to know such information, however, a neighbor would not.

- ❖ The Arizona Administrative Code (A.A.C. R6-5-7417) requires Child Welfare Licensing to investigate all complaints made regarding a licensed home. Licensing regulations further require the provider to be cooperative with investigations.
- ❖ The Arizona Administrative Code (A.A.C. R6-5-7436) requires the service provider to notify the child's case manager 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.

In Summary

- ❖ Be proactive in establishing positive relationships with the neighbors.
- ❖ Maintain high standards for the appearance and operation of the 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 Children (RSC). RSC has been incorporated as a non-profit organization since 1988, and it is our mission to work in positive partnership with the community in providing safe, healthy, and nurturing environments for children who have been removed from their custodial homes due to abuse, abandonment, or neglect.

In all of our homes, we have staff on duty whenever one or more child is present. Each staff is screened for criminal history and is required to complete a mandatory training program. We are licensed to operate the home by Child Welfare Licensing (CWL) under the Arizona Department of Economic Security. For more information on the status of our license, please contact Michelle Trca at CWL, (602) 347-6346.

It is our responsibility to help ensure that the children in our homes are given an opportunity to live what you and I consider a “normal” life. We take this responsibility very seriously, just as we do being your neighbor. I would like to stress to you the importance we at RSC 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.

Above all, remember, our objective at RSC is to work in positive partnership with our neighborhood community.

Sincerely,
Jane Smith
Community Liaison

Sample: Responding to a Neighbor's Concerns

M E M O

To: All Residential Staff
From: Jane Smith, Community Liaison
Subject: Answering Questions and Resolving Complaints

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

1. 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.
2. If you cannot answer the question or resolve the complaint, please let the neighbor know that the community liaison for RSC 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.
3. 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.
4. 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.
5. In the unlikely event that the neighbor expresses hostility, please page me immediately with a "911" message at (602) 555-3333.
6. 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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Equal Opportunity Employer/Program

Under the Americans with Disabilities Act, the Department must make reasonable accommodation to allow a person with a disability to take part in a program, service, or activity. For example, this means that if necessary, the Department must provide sign language interpreters for people who are deaf, a wheelchair accessible location, or enlarged print materials. It also means that the Department will take any other reasonable action that allows you to take part in and understand a program or activity, including making reasonable changes to an activity. If you believe that you will not be able to understand or take part in a program or activity because of your disability, please let us know of your disability needs in advance if at all possible. Please contact (602) 347-6346.

