

# Innovative Financing Options for Supported Housing

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Jeffrey Brown, Executive Director, Oakland County Community Mental Health Authority; Marc Craig, President, Community Housing Network, Troy, MI

OCCMHA serves a county with a population of more than 1 million in Detroit's northern suburbs. Through its network of providers, OCCMHA offers an array of community-based services to thousands of citizens with developmental disabilities and mental illness. Through the 1970s and 1980s, more than 200 six-person group homes were developed in scattered locations across the county, principally to serve people with developmental disabilities who were leaving state institutions that were closing. People with mental illness residing in the state mental health facility in Pontiac were later offered housing in apartments and scattered single-family residences as that facility was closing.

In 2001, OCCMHA recognized the need to achieve a number of policy objectives in housing for consumers:

- >> Separation of housing from supports
- >> Control of housing by consumers
- >> A wider array of integrated housing choices in scattered locations
- >> Affordable housing that does not contribute to a concentration of poverty
- >> Reduced dependence on the group home model
- >> Creation of new housing options and affordable housing resources
- >> Increased access to housing resources outside the mental health community
- >> Up-to-date housing information and referral for OCCMHA consumers and providers
- >> Coordinated, centralized management of existing housing resources.

To achieve these objectives, OCCMHA provided start-up funding to the newly formed Community Housing Network, a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization under contract to serve the housing needs of people receiving services from OCCMHA. Jeff Brown, OCCMHA's executive director, views housing as a critical service area, saying, "Access to affordable housing is the foundation for full

citizenship and community integration for persons we serve. It is essential to providing effective community supports."

In 2001, CHN's first responsibility was to coordinate the leasing and property management of 225 group homes that housed people served by OCCMHA. Nearly all the homes were owned by private investors and leased back under a variety of leasing arrangements with the state of Michigan, OCCMHA, or service providers. CHN took assignment of all but the state leases and assumed responsibility for making new leasing or other housing arrangements as the remaining state leases expired.

Although leasing and property management accounted for the majority of dollars in the contract between OCCMHA and CHN, other services provided by CHN proved to be more vital to achieving the long-term policy objectives. CHN launched an innovative Housing Resource Center to serve people with disabilities and their families and those who support them. Marc Craig, CHN president, notes "The HRC is at the heart of our service to the community. The tremendous response has shown us that this resource is valued by persons with disabilities, service agencies, and other area residents."

The HRC operates a number of programs and services. Information and referrals regarding programs such as Housing Choice (formerly Section 8) vouchers can be obtained in person, by phone, or through the CHN website, which receives, on average, more than 2,900 visits per month. The HRC manages a home-buyer assistance program for people with disabilities—the program provides home-buyer counseling, help with housing searches and, ultimately, access to a number of down-payment assistance programs. This kind of program allowed Jack Dobrecki to own a home for a monthly payment that is less than he had been paying to rent a small apartment.

HRC staff members are actively engaged in the community; for example, they conduct outreach programs and maintain Housing Choice voucher alert lists to inform people with disabilities about voucher availability. An independent living club provides social networking opportunities and timely information



**Jack Dobrecki**, now 58, was raised in an institution for people with developmental disabilities in Lapeer, Michigan, from the time he was 5. Beginning at age 19, Jack lived in a series of foster care homes and other residential programs in Oakland County. Now he is a homeowner and receives supportive services through the Oakland County Community Mental Health Authority.

about housing and supportive services. Several HRC staff members have received (or currently receive) services through OCCMHA.

To attract additional resources, CHN is an active participant and has taken various leadership roles in the local U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development's Continuum of Care planning group, the Oakland County Taskforce on Homelessness and Affordable Housing. Among its activities, this all-volunteer group is responsible for the annual application for HUD funding under the McKinney Vento Homeless Assistance program. In the past 8 years, CHN has become the area's largest provider of permanent supportive housing; it now attracts more than \$2 million annually to provide housing to more than 200 formerly homeless people with disabilities and their families.

CHN also serves as the lead agency for the county's Homeless Management Information System program. This congressionally mandated program tracks utilization of homeless shelters, people participating in permanent supportive housing, and data obtained from a communitywide homeless street count. "The HMIS data prove what we've suspected all along, that people with disabilities are disproportionately represented among the homeless population," Craig says. "This information helps us to secure more resources."

Other grant sources CHN has used to attract housing resources to benefit people with disabilities include the HUD Section 811 program, the Affordable Housing Program from members of the Federal Home Loan Bank system, and funds from the HOME program administered by Oakland County government and the Michigan State Housing Development Authority. These grants have attracted more than \$5 million to produce new units of both affordable home ownership and rental housing.

For the near future, CHN is ramping up to administer newly available funds under the Homeless Prevention and Rapid Rehousing Program, which was created under the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act. Plans to create additional housing units through the Low Income Housing Tax Credit program are also underway.

"We are delighted with the results of our partnership with CHN," Brown says. "It gives people with disabilities a seat at the table in housing planning and has effectively leveraged our resources to attract millions of new dollars to benefit them."

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*Jeffrey Brown is a member of the board of directors for the National Association of County Behavioral Health and Developmental Disability Directors, an affiliate of the National Association of Counties. He was recently elected to the executive committee of the Michigan Association of Community Mental Health Boards as treasurer. Brown has nearly 30 years experience as a hospital social worker, mental health clinician and manager, and community leader.*

*Marc Craig has been an affordable housing advocate for more than 25 years. He is founding president of Community Housing Network, a nonprofit organization that helps people in need find long-term housing solutions. He is also the founder of Springhill Housing Corporation, an organization that focuses on affordable housing development and management. Craig serves on the board of the Community Economic Development Association of Michigan and has been a member of numerous affordable housing and mental health advocacy organizations. Throughout his career, he has attracted housing resources in excess of \$15 million.*

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