

Sober living homes offer hope, support to recovering addicts

By MICHELLE BRUNETTI POST Staff Writer | Posted: Sunday, February 2, 2014 11:00 pm

Samantha was an excellent student who played sports in high school in Doylestown, Pa., she said, when a boyfriend convinced her to try taking the pain killer oxycontin to relax.

It escalated into a heroin addiction and a two-year struggle to regain control of her life.

After getting clean in a rehab, she went into a stepdown program in Somers Point, then in August thought she'd return to her parents' home. But her parents weren't ready for that, and a counselor suggested she live in a sober living house in Absecon run by the Hansen Foundation.

"It hurt me," the 20-year-old said in a recent interview, although now she has a great relationship with her parents and talks to them every day. The Press of Atlantic City is withholding her last name to protect her in future job and school applications.

"I was really skeptical," Samantha said of the living arrangement. "I didn't know what it was all about."

Sober living homes are houses in residential neighborhoods that are either rented from homeowners, as is the case with Oxford House, which has 27 homes in Atlantic, Cape May, Cumberland and southern Ocean counties; or purchased by nonprofits, as are the Hansen Foundation's three Serenity Houses.

Former addicts and alcoholics live together in all-female or all-male houses and support each other as they find jobs, go to 12-step meetings, and pay their share of expenses. Anyone who relapses must leave.

But neighbors are sometimes upset when they find out a sober living home has moved into their neighborhood, as was the case in Egg Harbor City when an Oxford House opened on Buffalo Avenue in November.

The right of recovering addicts to live together is protected by federal law, under the Americans with Disabilities Act and the Fair Housing Act. It has been upheld by courts all the way up to the U.S. Supreme Court.

There is research showing the homes do a much better job of helping people stay clean than simply returning them to their old neighborhoods after treatment.

Research also shows that, in general, recovery houses do not depress property values or increase crime or other problems, although there have been a few high-profile cases nationwide that have frightened people.

In October, a 25-year-old man died of an alleged heroin overdose in an Oxford House in Rumson, Monmouth County, and there was a nonfatal overdose in the same house in December, prompting the municipality to take legal action to try to close it.

Finding a lot of support

Samantha had to overcome her own fears to move in to Serenity House. She was afraid living with other addicts would mean she'd have to worry about people stealing her things, or even her boyfriend.

"When you're an addict, you have trust issues," she said. "But when I got here, I felt like I belonged."

She became best friends with her roommate and found a lot of support from her eight other housemates.

"We go to meetings together, make dinners together," she said. "I was coming from zero friends in rehab to automatically having eight good friends from the start," Samantha said of her roommates, who range in age from 20 to 39.

"We're really all trying to become better people. That's why we're living in a sober living house," Samantha said.

Serenity House residents are overseen by a house manager, who intervenes if a resident fails a drug test or shows other signs of relapsing. Anyone who begins using drugs or alcohol must leave, but staff will make sure the person gets to a safe place, back with family or in another living situation, said Director of Operations Terri Burns, a former heroin addict who has been drug and alcohol free for 16 years, she said.

"They can't stay here. We have a zero-tolerance policy," said Burns, adding that all staff are recovering addicts, so they know what the residents go through.

"We get excited about recovery," Burns said. She said 85 percent of those who remain clean while in Serenity House stay drug and alcohol free when living independently.

One of the house's alumni was visiting on a recent weekday. Colleen, who is in her 50s, has been on her own for two months, renting a house with a roommate. The Press is withholding her last name, again to protect her in future job applications.

She said she spent 14 months at Serenity House after a six-month rehab for a decadelong alcohol habit that had become an addition to pain killers, and finally heroin.

"I lost everything — not just material things, but my family," she said.

Now that she's in recovery, she again has a positive relationship with her three children and other

family members, she said. She credits Serenity House with showing her how to live a normal life again.

"Many nights, we'd sit up and talk till 3 a.m. around this table," she said, sitting in the kitchen. "It kept us all going."

Skeptical neighbors

Retired nurse Debbie Argenbright said she feels no ill will toward the residents of the all-male sober living Oxford House that opened next door to her Buffalo Avenue home in Egg Harbor City in November.

"I introduced myself to them. There are two guys living there right now," Argenbright said. "I told (one of them) I didn't harbor anything against him personally. But I do not believe Oxford House should just come in without letting people know what's going on."

The nonprofit Oxford House organization helps arrange for recovering alcoholics and drug addicts to live unsupervised in residential neighborhoods, with some organizational support from an Oxford House representative.

Oxford Houses are run democratically, and residents must leave if they are found to be using drugs or alcohol. Residents must have jobs and pay their own share of rent and other living expenses.

In November, Argenbright put signs up in her yard calling for the house to move elsewhere, but city officials told her she had to remove them or apply for permits to keep them up, she said. She took them down.

The rented house is just a half block from the town's elementary school, and children walk by on their way to school, she said.

In addition to the one in Egg Harbor City, Oxford House homes are in Absecon, Atlantic City, Egg Harbor Township, Forked River in Lacey Township, Linwood, Little Egg Harbor Township, Manahawkin in Stafford Township, Ocean City, Somers Point, Tuckerton, Ventnor, Villas in Lower Township and Vineland, according to the group's website.

Argenbright said there was a lot of activity next door the day after Christmas, with cars coming and going and a lot of noise. But other than that, it has been "very quiet and subdued," she said.

But the experience of neighbors of the Oxford House in Rumson has made her wary. It opened in August, had a fatal heroin overdose in October, followed by a nonfatal overdose in mid-December, according to news reports.

Rumson has moved to get a permanent injunction to close the house. In response, Oxford House has filed a federal lawsuit against the borough, alleging federal civil rights violations.

“The No. 1 problem we face is Not-in-My-Back-Yard, NIMBYism,” said Jason Howell, president of the board of the National Alliance for Recovery Residences. “It’s unfounded fears. There are plenty of studies out there showing group homes like recovery residences do not lower property values or increase crime.”

At any given time, 10 percent of the population is suffering from addiction, he said. “It’s more likely that other neighbors are abusing drugs or alcohol, than a group of people living in sober homes.”

Sober living homes —the difference

Jennifer Hansen, founder of the Hansen Foundation and a former heroin addict who got clean almost 20 years ago during her eighth stay in a drug rehab, said her nonprofit runs two residential treatment facilities, also called halfway houses, and three sober living houses.

She said there were no sober living homes in South Jersey at the time of her early recovery, so after rehab at Seabrook House in Bridgeton, she went to a recovery residence run by New Directions for Women in a residential neighborhood in Costa Mesa, Calif. That experience helped her stay clean, she said.

Hansen House’s residential treatment houses are licensed by the state Department of Health and Human Services, offer treatment and are staffed 24 hours a day, every day, Hansen said. The treatment center Hendricks House in Vineland manages them, she said.

Residents are supervised at all times, and the organization gets them jobs and gives them transportation to those jobs. There are in-house counselors and awake overnight staff.

They are expensive to run, she said.

Sober living homes, on the other hand, also called recovery residences, are places where people live much more independently. They are much less expensive to run. Residents pay \$150 a week to stay in a her foundation’s recovery residences, Hansen said.

Generally, people come to Hansen’s recovery homes after treatment, but sometimes people quit using on their own and then seek out a sober living home.

“For us, it’s better if they come from a rehab. We see more success that way,” Hansen said. “But I have seen a lot of success when people just decided they want to change their lives.”

Cost of treatment is a huge problem. “People can’t afford to keep paying \$30,000 a month (for rehab), and the insurance companies don’t want to keep paying. So a lot of times the only option people have is detox and go into sober living,” she said.

It isn’t easy to convince neighbors to accept recovery residences, Hansen said.

"We had a horrible time in Absecon. I was basically crucified there," Hansen said of opening the first Serenity House.

Now there are two there, and the neighbors have come around, she said, but the beginning was tough.

"I tried to explain to them, the addicts are your sons and daughters," she said. "They are coming out of rehab and have no place to go. People think of them as violent criminals. We don't take violent criminals or sex offenders, anything like that."

Hansen's Serenity Houses are always full, and "we could fill 10 more houses," she said. "Sober living is really what makes the difference between someone staying clean and not staying clean."

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