

Why Shared Housing?

By: Christine Santana, Rapid Re-Housing Manager, Columbus House, Inc.

When we approach our clients with the option of shared housing, we are often met with “I do not want to share an apartment” or “I do not trust anyone.” While we would love to assist our clients with moving into their own apartment, we know it is typically not feasible. Shared housing is an option we offer our subsidy and non-subsidy clients to lessen the burden of rent, bills, food, and other costs. Most of our clients have little to no income, which is insufficient to afford an apartment on their own. So, we begin our conversation at the end...

Where do you see yourself when our assistance ends? How will you work on saving money? How will you pay full rent and utilities? We try to keep it as honest and as simple as possible with our clients. The FMR (Fair Market Rent) in our area is \$1,163, and although our program can pay up to the FMR, we do not think it reasonable to place a client in an apartment with this high of a rent and so little income. That is where shared housing comes in. While we understand client preference, we must educate clients on their best possible route for success. We talk to them about the low cost of living in shared housing. We start by asking clients if they think it easier to come up with \$600 or \$1,200 a month. The answer is always the same: \$600. Next, we remind them of utilities. In our shared housing units, all utilities are included with no exceptions. The burden is cut in half or even a third, depending on how many bedrooms the unit contains. Our client has only one monthly payment to make for housing, which is, depending on the unit, between \$550 and \$700. Each client receives their own individual lease so they are not responsible for other persons in the unit. This protects both the tenants and landlord.

In addition to the financial aspect, we must also help clients overcome the stigmas that accompany the idea of shared living. Clients automatically associate it with jail, the shelter, or the hospital. We proceed to show clients available units. Contrary to belief, our program often finds units with brand new furniture, flat screen televisions mounted on the walls, cable, Wi-Fi access, and, on occasion, handicap accessibility. Additionally, all units have locks on the bedroom doors for privacy and safety reasons. Clients are typically surprised and excited about the opportunity, and abandon their reservations about shared housing. Additionally, many of our shared housing clients actually enjoy having housemates. Some clients who are newly housed and alone feel isolated. Typically surrounded by a lot of people, living alone is a large adjustment for them. They communicate to us that they enjoy the company and feel safer.

We have worked very hard to build solid, mutually beneficial relationships with our landlords. On average, for a 3 family house with 3 bedrooms on each floor, our

landlords are bringing in \$5,400 a month in rental fees. They are making a nice profit on this venture, resulting in their willingness to make improvements and accommodate our clients. We believe we are changing the mindsets of more than just our clients. Landlords have come to trust us. We fully educate them on our program and always stay true to our word. We typically replace a client that has moved out in only a few days. Also, should there be an issue with a client that cannot be resolved, we find a way to relocate the client quickly to another unit. Many of our landlords have even become part of the natural support system for our clients. They have helped improve a variety of life skills such reading mail and filling out forms. Most of our clients need that extra attention, especially since they are just getting back into consistent housing, and we are very careful with our landlord selection process. We are hoping, with the support of the local landlords, that we can continue to house clients in nice, low cost units. We look forward to fully putting behind us the days of housing our clients wherever we can with whoever will take them.