

Starting a Clubhouse

Introduction – What is a Clubhouse?

The guaranteed rights of membership in a Clubhouse are: a right to a place to come, a right to meaningful work, a right to meaningful relationships, and a right to a place to return. Providing for these rights to members suggests most of the considerations of “how to”.

It is important to remember that a Clubhouse is first and foremost a community of people. It is a community before it is a building or a program. A Clubhouse is a community organized to help people living with serious mental illness as they manage their illness and rejoin the worlds of employment, education, family and friends. People who come to a Clubhouse are called members; they are men and women of all ages who work within the Clubhouse to promote and achieve their recovery from schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, major depression, or other serious and persistent forms of mental illness. Participation is entirely voluntary, with all Clubhouse services and opportunities provided by members and staff working side by side as colleagues. The International Standards for Clubhouse Programs further define the Clubhouse Model of Rehabilitation.

Starting to build this community involves people coming together and developing relationships through shared work. The work of a Clubhouse community always involves projects and tasks that are important to the people who participate. It is in this context that the start up work of a Clubhouse should begin.

The Working Group

Initially when you decide to start a Clubhouse it is a good idea to form what we refer to as a Clubhouse, “working group”. The working group consists of talented, energetic individuals who are both committed to and uniquely positioned to helping a Clubhouse get started. Typically a working group consists of people who represent the following interests: mental health consumers, family members, mental health professionals, local politicians, community leaders, business people, and individuals who can be helpful accessing funding for the Clubhouse. The working group is charged with initiating Clubhouse activity and providing community education, support for the new Clubhouse, funding for the Clubhouse and hiring the Director, working with her/him to locate a building for the Clubhouse and beginning to identify community employers for involvement in the Transitional Employment Program.

Establishing contact and developing a relationship with an ICCD Certified Training Base can also help to keep the working group pointed in the right direction.

Typically after these items are accomplished the working group will either transition into the role of the Board of Directors or the Clubhouse Advisory Board. The group (now a board) from there forward provides oversight management, support and fundraising to the Clubhouse and delegates responsibility for day-to-day management of the Clubhouse.

The Work of the Working Group

Using the list above, the initial participants should begin to identify other local people who would be appropriate for membership on the Clubhouse working group. Once identified the proposed individuals should be educated about the Clubhouse approach (reading the Clubhouse Standards is a good start) and if possible scheduled for a tour of a nearby ICCD certified Clubhouse.

Concurrently, the working group members should begin to educate themselves about possible sources of startup and ongoing funding for the Clubhouse. These sources might include: a local government, state/county provincial/city or national mental health agency, vocational rehabilitation agency and public health or social service agencies. Additionally, there are many public and private foundations that fund community mental health projects. Another alternative is to work with an existing mental health program and convert it into a Clubhouse.

In order to receive funding from any of the above organizations the Clubhouse will have to either be incorporated as a not-for-profit/non-governmental organization or be part of an already existing not for profit/non-governmental organization. This may be the very first task of the working group.

Government Funding

In many places there are government funds allocated on an annual basis for providing services to people with serious mental illness. Often there are also funds allocated for people with disabilities in general. Almost always there is an established system in place that is used for determining how these funds are allocated for services to people in need. There are lots of different ways of taking funding decisions in the different countries but it is always a good idea to bring one or more of these government people onto the working group.

Public and Private Foundations

Although it is uncommon for foundations to provide perpetual funding for a Clubhouse it is not uncommon for them to provide start up funds or capital funds or one-time grants. The members of the working group should seek the help of someone who knows the local and national foundation arena.

Existing Program Conversion

Although this sounds like the easiest way to start a Clubhouse it is often the most difficult. In this scenario an existing program model that is funded to provide services to people with mental illness reorganizes into a Clubhouse community. (e.g. a day treatment or partial hospitalization program). The difficult part of this plan is that the people involved as employees or consumers of the existing program would have to adjust their roles from staff/client or therapist/patient to Clubhouse colleagues. The adjustment is often times very difficult for staff to make. On the other hand, this is many times the most expedient way to gain Clubhouse funding. To bring about this kind of change the working group will have to provide or arrange for education about the Clubhouse model for funders, staff and consumers of the existing program.

Again, visiting an area certified Clubhouse will provide a “hands-on” view of what a Clubhouse looks like. Networking with a training base will also be helpful

Note: The Clubhouse operating budget should grow with the active membership.

Educating the Community

The Clubhouse working group will have to organize the education of the local community as to what a Clubhouse is all about. The primary education focus is on the mental health community but also important are politicians, philanthropists, and business groups such as Rotary Clubs or Chamber of Commerce, and community organizations such as the Alliance for the Mentally Ill. Some ideas about accomplishing this are listed below.

- A generic letter/brochure that describes your working group, the Clubhouse model and the support and help needed
- A conference or seminar (one day) that focuses on the Clubhouse model. Seek participation from the ICCD or ICCD Clubhouses.
- Visit a Clubhouse if possible.
- Clubhouse videotapes.

- Obtain newsletters or brochures of other certified Clubhouses that show the work of the Clubhouses.
- Distribution of Clubhouse literature.
- Include potential Clubhouse members in public presentations.

Identifying Employers for the Clubhouse

One of the most helpful things the working group (and later the Board) can do for a Clubhouse is to assist in developing Transitional Employment (TE) placements. TE is a cornerstone of the Clubhouse model. It is also one of the most difficult components to operationalize. It has been our experience that Clubhouses that develop TE sooner experience more success than those that wait or struggle for years to develop TE placements for members. Successful employment programs are also often a magnet for additional funding from government and private organizations.

It is very important for the members of the working group to educate themselves about the Transitional Employment Program and to help line up a few quality employers to provide TE opportunities at the beginning of Clubhouse operations.

A brief description of a Clubhouse/Transitional Employment relationship is as follows:

- Clubhouse staff learn the entry level job in advance;
- A Clubhouse member (program participant) goes through the employer's personnel department as an hourly employee, but as a part-time worker, does not require a benefits package;
- Program staff train the member on the job until the staff, the member and their supervisors agree that they are ready to work independently;
- Members return to the Clubhouse for the balance of the day as a part of their support system and to strengthen them for future independent work;
- The Clubhouse guarantees absence coverage, either with the help of members already working on the other half of the job, by one of the program staff;
- If a member is not able to perform the job, he or she is expeditiously replaced by a new member;

- Placements usually last from six to nine months, at which point the working member moves on to a new TE, independent work, or school, and another member is then trained for the job.

Hiring the Director

Hiring the first Director for the Clubhouse may be the most important single task for the working group. Although the Clubhouse is community based on a flattened hierarchy and mutual relationships, the Director is the leader in this community. The Director must be a person with both a high level of understanding and a commitment to Clubhouse values and principles. She/he should also have the capacity to work long hours, represent the Clubhouse publicly, teach the model and manage the day-to-day operations of the complicated community service program.

Historically we have learned that training is one of the most effective ways to ensure the success of the Clubhouse. Establishing a Clubhouse is only effective if the process is supported by the entire Clubhouse. Therefore it is necessary for the Director (as soon as possible!), key staff and members to have been through training and to fully understand and embrace the Clubhouse model.

If the Director is not committed to the model it simply will not happen. A Clubhouse is still a radically different approach than every other program of psychiatric rehabilitation. It is also a very difficult model to implement and maintain. If there is not dedicated leadership it is very easy to get distracted from the model and the Clubhouse will quickly take the form of other traditional mental health programs or be totally weakened by compromises.

In addition to training the Director really needs to be a multi-talented person. A Director has to be able to participate in the professional mental health arena, the political arena, the fundraising arena, and the business/employer arena and at the same be a hands on generalist in the day-to-day work of the Clubhouse. The Director has to be a high-energy person with enough charisma to lead, teach, problem solve, have fun and deal with crisis situation.

Some classic mistakes when hiring a Director include the following;

- Hiring from within the auspice organization as a matter of policy rather than because it is the best person for the position.
- Hiring a Director and then letting her/him talk you out of sending her/him to training in the first year.
- Hiring a part time director.
- Waiting too long to dismiss a Director that is not working out.

It is possible to hire a good Director from outside the Clubhouse community, and it may be your only choice because of your location, sponsoring agency or finances. In this case, it is important that you take your time and make sure the person has all of the skills, values and dedication necessary.

The working group should look to other strong Clubhouses or the ICCD to get copies of Director job descriptions, help in hiring, and support after the Director has been hired.

The First Days of the Clubhouse

Once a Director has been hired, she/he will have to introduce themselves' to the mental health community that will be making referrals to the Clubhouse, or those people who are themselves potential members of the Clubhouse. Initially the director would work as part of the working group. Hopefully the working group would arrange introductions, meetings and maybe even a reception for the new Director and include all of the family groups, consumer groups, mental health organizations, government officials, funders and potential TE employers.

The initial days at the Clubhouse should be educational in nature as the group identifies what are its most important needs of its members. For example, if getting to and from the Clubhouse is difficult, transportation is an area to focus on as a need. Similarly, we get hungry during the day so preparing a meal and an operation to serve a group of people becomes an area to focus on. The important point is that Clubhouses need to grow through a process of deciding what is important to their particular community.

At the core of the Clubhouse experience is the work-ordered day, an eight-hour period Monday through Friday during which the business of the Clubhouse is accomplished. The work ordered day intentionally parallels the typical business hours of the general community. Members and staff work together in an open and collegial environment. Examples of the work that may be completed include; preparing a daily lunch, answering phones, writing a newsletter, operating an employment placement, providing community support services, and participating in advocacy efforts on behalf of the Clubhouse and people with mental illness in general and whatever other projects are seen as important to the life of the Clubhouse.

In the first few days it is important to create an atmosphere with a sense of belonging and trust. Greeting members each day, calling those that may have initially come but not returned, or potential members, and talking openly about the direction of the Clubhouse with all those involved helps to foster a sense of caring and responsibility for those involved.

If the budget has been established, hiring key staff members becomes a priority. Members should be included in this process in screening resumes, participating on

interview panels, providing tours for applicants, and spending time with potential in the work units if possible. This builds a sense of ownership right from the beginning days and shows the members that their opinion counts. If the Director and a 1- 2 board members are the only individuals involved in the hiring process, not only does this create an unneeded hierarchy, it prevents members from taking on leadership roles. It also has a potential effect of resentment if the staff members do not work out and the Director was the only one doing the hiring. If members are included and the new staff doesn't work out, then there is a sense of shared responsibility and the group owns it, not an individual. This is an important example of building relationships in the Clubhouse.

The Director and new members can also do the beginning work of buying furniture and equipment, naming the Clubhouse, and organizing the space.

Building and Space

A Clubhouse needs to have its own identity and space. As outlined in the Standards, Clubhouses should be separate from mental health centers or institutional settings. The Clubhouse should be designed to facilitate the work ordered day and at the same time be attractive, adequate in size, and convey a sense of dignity and respect (Standard #12).

Some specific tips on building location and size include:

- Try to get a building that will be large enough to grow into.
- The building ideally should have access to public transportation, shopping, and
- If funds are available to purchase, modify and equip a building, then that is

Large, open spaces are preferable rather than lots of rooms with walls. Additional tips include:

- Virtually every Clubhouse has an area where food is prepared, served and eaten.
- A kitchen area where food is prepared needs to have ample space for a group of people to be able to prepare food, wash dishes, and accommodate people walking in and out of the area.
- The dining area should have space for tables for people to sit at. If possible, avoid long rows of table together and instead have tables spaced comfortably to seat 5-6 people at them. This creates a more comfortable dining experience

and creates opportunities for conversations with small groups. When anticipating how many members will attend the program, plan for the future, not

just at the present time. For example, if you think you'll have 20 members a day to start, plan for probably 40 or so, which would mean 6- 8 tables. The cost of doing the construction or alterations to an existing building right the first time will be far less expensive than if you have to put additions on later.

- Many Clubhouses also have a snack bar area. Space should be large enough to accommodate a refrigerator, stocking goods, a cash register and for people to move in behind it to operate it. Think perhaps of how a movie theatre does it and that's how some Clubhouses have arranged them.
- A clerical work unit where members can use computers and work on the Clubhouse newsletter is also a regular mainstay in most Clubhouses. Again, a large open space with perhaps a roundtable in the middle of it is preferable. The surrounding space usually includes tables to spread projects out, computer stations, a Xerox machine and other communication equipment such as a fax machine. The table in the middle serves as a space for members and staff to gather together to have morning and afternoon unit meetings. Partitions can be used to provide more quiet space if needed but these can be re-arranged if needed, rather than putting in many walls.
- An administrative office where the Director and members can work out of is also needed. Room for a desk and computer, file cabinets and a few chairs is preferred. This provides a more intimate meeting space and a good area to work at for people who have more difficulty with the noise of the unit in the background.
- A conference meeting room is also needed. Clubhouses have regularly scheduled policy or administrative meetings and having a large meeting room, preferably with a white board to post items for discussion is helpful.
- When designing your space, also think about the layout of where people are greeted. The greeting or reception area should be relatively close to the door that most members enter the building through.
- If you plan to have a thrift store or other units, think of their general size needs. A thrift store that is open to the general public as well as the members may be better suited near the parking lot or door entry so that the general public isn't wandering through the rest of the Clubhouse to get to the thrift store.

Conclusion

After the Clubhouse starts to operate, the working group or Board role shifts to other important areas such as, long range planning, fundraising, public relations, advocacy, and finding other Board members to help with employment development.

Clubhouse members should also be on the Board and their role is primarily educational. This also reduces the responsibility of the Clubhouse Director in this area and provides a “reality check” to Board members.

We hope that this document is helpful to you in starting an ICCD Clubhouse in your area. In doing so, you are joining a fast growing federation of Clubhouse communities from cities and towns around the world. We currently average 20 new Clubhouses each year. We strongly encourage embarking on this exciting venture with the support of a certified training base. The ICCD is available to provide technical assistance to you as well and we can be reached at (212) 582-0343. Our Website is www.clubhouse-intl.org.

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