

Family Volunteer Support Group for Jewish Aged in Senior Housing

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How can relatives, friends and tenants, working together, make a good senior adult apartment building become a functioning, viable community? This paper will describe the formation of an innovative family member volunteer organization, Friends of Revitz House (FORH), which offers support and services for the aged residents of Revitz House. The purpose of the FORH group is to enhance the tenants' quality of life and encourage independent living. FORH serves as liaison and facilitator in this process.

Setting

Revitz House, located in Rockville, Maryland, a suburb of Washington, D.C., is adjacent to, but independent of, a complex of Jewish community agencies which includes the Hebrew Home of Greater Washington, the Jewish Community Center, the Jewish Social Service Agency, and the Jewish Council on Aging.

Revitz House is a United States Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) funded, non-sectarian, ten-story, highrise with 250 apartments. It serves 285 residents whose average age is 84. There are 20 larger apartments for married couples and 20 apartments especially designed for handicapped persons.

All the apartments consist of a living room-dining room combination, bedroom, bathroom, and a small kitchen. Tenants furnish and maintain their own apartments and participate in a strictly kosher communal dinner. Monthly fair market rental is \$376 for a single and \$390 for couples. However, with the HUD subsidy, approximately 70 percent of the tenants pay an average of \$229 a month; ten percent pay the fair market value. Twenty percent receive full rent subsidies under HUD section

236 and pay 30 percent of their average monthly income. All tenants are charged an additional mandatory \$115 per month for their dinner.

The Board of Directors establishes policies and has overall responsibility for the operation of Revitz House. The Board is governed by HUD regulations. Revitz House is managed by the Hebrew Home of Greater Washington, under contract to the Revitz House Board of Directors. A staff member from the Hebrew Home acts as the Management Representative for Revitz House. The Management Corporation hires a Resident Manager to oversee the day-to-day building operation. The Jewish Social Service Agency subsidizes two hours per week of casework service and the Jewish Community Center provides a part-time activity director (20 hours per week).

The tenant population represents diverse social and educational backgrounds; 99 percent are Jewish and many are immigrants. Tenants are from all parts of the United States and the majority are either residents of the Washington, D.C. metropolitan area and/or have children living in the area.

Technically the apartment house serves the physically and mentally well aged. However, there are varying degrees of self-sufficiency. Some are to-

tally self-sufficient, others require minimal assistance in activities of daily living, and some need personal attendants.

History of Formation of FORH

A Tenant Association was formed shortly after the opening of Revitz House. This group represents the tenants and deals with management on matters of mutual concern.

Five years after the occupancy of the building, family members became acutely aware of the lack of a sense of community among the tenants. Tenant dissatisfaction was reported to staff and to relatives regarding inadequacies of food service, building maintenance, transportation, in-house activities and security. Tenants expressed feelings of vulnerability, helplessness and powerlessness in dealing with these problems and an inability to communicate with the management, despite the existence of a Tenant Association. Many felt intimidated and were fearful that they would be asked to leave if they complained. As individuals, they felt they did not have sufficient strength to deal with management.

A few concerned family members met to discuss the problems and possible solutions. As an outgrowth of the initial, informal discussions in March 1983, a meeting was arranged with the Tenant Association leadership. The tenants were delighted to learn that their families were concerned and welcomed the formation of a support group. Subsequently Friends of Revitz House (FORH) was created.

Objectives

The following objectives are stated in FORH's Articles of Incorporation:

- Developing a sense of "community" at Revitz House;

- Supporting tenant activities;
- Encouraging involvement of tenants and relatives;
- Disseminating relevant information regarding services available to the elderly;
- Discussing mutual needs and concerns;
- Serving as liaison between tenants and the Revitz House Corporation Board; and
- Facilitating cooperative effort among residents, management, and Jewish and non-Jewish community agencies.

Organization

FORH is an all volunteer organization with a membership of approximately 200. It has an Executive Board consisting of officers and committee chairpersons. One or more tenants serve on each of the following committees:

- Activities/Transportation
 - Religious Services
 - Birthday Celebrations
 - Computer Workshop
- Beauty/Barber Shop
- Building Maintenance
- Convenience Store
- Food Service
- Mailing
- Membership
- Newsletter
- Resident Health/Emergency Procedures
- Resident/Relative Directory
- Welcome Booklet

Funding

Membership dues were \$10.00 in 1983 and increased to \$15.00 in 1984. Approximately \$2,000.00 in donations were received, ranging from \$20.00 to \$1,000.00. Other gifts include shelves, refrigeration and equipment for the convenience store; a stereo for the dance group and a video tape recorder.

Needs Assessment

FORH identified areas of concern, formed committees, and invited one or more active tenant members to participate in each committee. Questionnaires were developed and circulated to the

tenants dealing with their perceptions regarding the food, the need for a convenience store in the building, and the need for a beauty and barber shop. Informal phone and personal interviews with tenants were also conducted. Meetings held with the Tenant Association, the Revitz House Board of Directors, the Revitz House Management, and the relatives, resulted in improved cooperation, communication, and interaction. Mechanisms evolved to insure that tenants' problems were identified, validated and acted upon.

Accomplishments

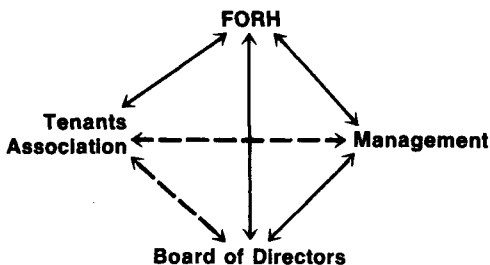
Based on an ongoing assessment of tenant needs, the accomplishments of the FORH family volunteer support group in just one year of operation are substantive. Services and benefits, both real and perceived, include the following:

- Available space in the building was converted to create and equip a convenience store. The store stocks over 100 kosher food and other essential items for daily living, plus health and beauty aids. A medical prescription pick-up and delivery service is also available on a daily basis.
- Tenants are requested, when possible, to put their complaints in writing, with a copy forwarded to FORH.
- A "Suggestion Box" was placed in the FORH-sponsored convenience store.
- Tenant requests for building maintenance are recorded on work order forms, with tenants keeping one copy. This not only serves as documentation, but also provides more efficient management response.
- Tenant requests for improved bus transportation to and from medical offices, shopping, etc., led to discussions with the Jewish Council on Aging to analyze the problems. Meetings attended by representatives of the Tenant Association and members of the FORH transportation committee, resulted in improved and expanded transportation services.
- Tenants are encouraged to utilize outside community resources. For example, speakers from the fire and police departments were invited to address safety concerns and review fire and ambulance procedures. Workshops and fire drills were held for a full week. Other examples include voter registration, health seminars, varied demonstrations and presentations. Health and safety monitoring is ongoing.
- Tenant requests for additional weekly religious services were met with FORH sharing some of the responsibility.
- A directory was assembled and published listing tenants (by apartment number and by name) and relatives to call in an emergency. Tenants are now able to locate each other in the building. Additionally, the directory serves as an updated resource for management.
- New residents' need for orientation and information resulted in the publication of a *Welcome Booklet*.
- Assistance required by some tenants to clean their own apartments was partially resolved by contracting with a private cleaning service to provide weekly or monthly cleaning as requested.
- Computer workshops were introduced for: recreation; training volunteers to work with pre-schoolers; and training volunteers to assist with the computerization of Revitz House records.
- With the encouragement of FORH, cadres of tenant volunteers were formed to implement a number of self-help programs including:
 - Convenience Store
 - Snack Bar/Lunchroom

- Daily morning check on the welfare of residents
- Elevator operation during the dinner hour
- Mailings
- Sale of postage stamps
- Special activities: Dinner Parties (monthly), Birthday Parties (monthly), Speakers

Relationship with Management and Tenants

Perhaps one of the most significant accomplishments has been the building of a partnership between FORH, the Tenants Association, Management, and the Board of Directors. Through working together, FORH was eventually seen as a productive and contributory partner rather than as an adversary. FORH functions as ombudsman, liaison, and interpreter of policies and procedures between the groups as follows:



Because of the weak communication link between the Tenants Association and the Board of Directors, FORH, which has a nonvoting representative on the Board of Directors, represents the tenant interests. FORH serves as a catalyst for many behind-the-scenes activities and as an interpreter of tenant needs and management policies. This position could be strengthened by formalization of FORH's non-voting status.

Prior to the formation of FORH, family members were generally perceived by management as "nuisances and troublemakers". When FORH was organized, management regarded the

group as a potential adversary and indeed, many of the FORH members saw themselves in this role. FORH leadership was aware of the dynamics of this antagonism and consciously focused on a positive approach, specifically reinforcing discussion about what we *can do* rather than what we "don't want". In time, and with great effort, FORH members were perceived as allies rather than antagonists, as a positive force and as partners in a reciprocally supportive arrangement.

While tremendous strides have been made in cooperative efforts, management as well as the Board need to acknowledge and utilize the vast, untapped resources and potential of the tenant population. Tenants should be involved in matters pertaining to policy, planning and administration of Revitz House. It is crucial that the tenants feel genuinely needed and involved and responsible for decisions affecting their lives and the building in which they live. This sense of responsibility keeps the elderly active, alert and committed. It is anticipated that as a result of continued sensitivity and awareness, a tenant representative will be invited to join the Board of Directors as a voting member.

Relationship with Families

The traumatic change of residence, especially for those moving from out-of-town, made adjustment more difficult and increased the need for a support group. Through their participation in FORH, members have gained a more realistic approach to group apartment living in general and to their individual family needs in particular. Initially, many families focused on "doing for" their relatives. Relatives became aware that often parents' complaints about the food or activities or management might be a displacement of feelings of frustration, anger, or loneliness.

As tenant needs were identified, discussed, and acted on, FORH members discovered that they were also functioning as a support group for themselves. The relatives often felt powerless. Mutual concerns were addressed in a series of evening sessions entitled "You and Your Aging Parent," conducted by a social worker. In many instances, family members' "guilt" that they are not providing direct care for their relative is being channeled into constructive activity on behalf of all the tenants.

Conclusions

Tenant activities have tripled. Emphasis is on programs which foster independence. Through the dissemination of relevant information via written materials (fliers, notices, questionnaires, speakers, information bulletins, etc.) the tenants have a clearer understanding of services available to them.

The quality of life of Revitz House tenants has been enhanced both psychosocially and physically. A sense of community has evolved. Tenants feel they are part of a powerful network, not merely helpless individuals. They have the support of their individual family members as well as the group support of FORH and the Tenant Association. Being in control and having a sense of

self-determination has added meaning to their lives and possibly years.

As a result of FORH's active participation as a facilitator and liaison, the organization has helped diminish the isolation of the elderly tenants from the community by involving others (children, grandchildren, friends, and community members). The program impacts positively and constructively on the tenants, family members, friends, management, the Board of Directors, local businesses and other service organizations. The program serves to unite the community in a common effort to maintain the elderly in an independent living arrangement.

The larger community also benefits when elderly persons are more independent. The more services an organization such as FORH can provide to maintain the elderly in an independent living situation, the less the financial and social burden on the community as a whole. Tenants and family members have shown that combined efforts can make a good facility even better.

The model of the FOHR project is adaptable for use in other communities and other settings insofar as resources such as manpower and materials are readily available in all communities. A project like FORH is inexpensive and can generate its own funds. Rewards are visible to the aged residing in senior housing, to their families, and to the community.