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Substance abuse recovery odds increase in a community setting



CHICAGO — Following substance abuse treatment, individuals who live in a collaborative housing setting with community rules and responsibilities have their substance abuse treated more effectively than those not provided supportive housing, according to research led by Leonard Jason, a community psychologist at DePaul University.

Research shows that living in a functional community and engaging in positive social structures enhances the recovery trajectory for alcohol and drug abuse, noted Jason, director of the Center for Community Research at DePaul.

“Our research looks at Oxford House and tests a dynamic systems-based theory that explains how house residents with recovery-related attitudes, behaviors and social relationships co-evolve. It also shows how these emergent individual characteristics and house-level social structures subsequently link to individuals’ recovery endpoints,” said Jason.

Oxford House is a concept in recovery from drug and alcohol addiction. It is a democratically run, self-supporting and drug free home. According to Jason, the number of residents in a house can range from six to 15. There are houses for men or women and also houses that accept women with children. Over the past year, more than 25,000 people have lived in these recovery homes, making them the largest self-help residential recovery program in the country.

Since 1991, Jason and co-researchers have published more than 100 articles involving more than 2,000 Oxford House residents who are trying to overcome substance abuse in Illinois, other parts of the U.S. and internationally. In one of the studies, some patients were assigned to an Oxford House, while others were in a usual-care condition area such as an outpatient treatment center or self-help group.

According to Jason, at the 24-month follow-up, those in an Oxford House setting had significantly lower substance use, higher monthly income and lower incarceration rates, compared with the usual-care condition.

Jason recently was awarded a five-year grant of a nearly \$3 million from the National Institutes of Health’s National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism to continue this research. The aim is to study why individuals relapse when suffering from alcoholism and analyze the social and collaborative atmosphere of Oxford Houses to see what makes those residents thrive.

Research findings

The findings of this research may contribute to reducing unnecessary health care costs by improving the effectiveness of the residential recovery home system in the United States. The research team, which includes Ed Stevens, project director and former graduate of the community psychology doctoral program at DePaul, and John Light, a sociologist from the Oregon Research Institute who is one of the nation's top authorities on social networks. At the present time there are four DePaul graduate students in clinical and community psychology who are working on their dissertations with Oxford House residents.

"This research on Oxford House and community behavior will provide significant insight on house structure and predictors of an individual's likelihood of maintaining a positive recovery trajectory," he said.

The findings also can provide data to help others restructure and improve similar community based recovery settings, said Jason.

"Treating substance abuse disorders is costly and time consuming for the current health care system. Our reports are looked at very closely by government leaders who are trying to decide how to allocate resources to help treat substance abuse," said Jason.

Different types of peer support

Similar to those who participate in Alcoholics Anonymous, members of an Oxford House receive abstinence support from peers. However, unlike AA, there is no single, set course for recovery that all members must follow, according to Jason. Residents of Oxford Houses decide personally whether to seek outside of the home either psychological or substance abuse treatment by professionals or a 12-step organization.

"These studies really have influence and a great impact on getting people to understand how effective collaborative housing can be to treat drug and alcohol abuse," said project director Ed Stevens. "We are studying collaborative housing to understand what works and what doesn't work to help this type of treatment become more effective."

"Oxford House offers residents the freedom to decide which treatment they desire while receiving constant support and guidance within an abstinent communal setting," said Jason. "It is a low-cost, safe and effective way to treat substance abuse in a collaborative housing setting."

Community support is important element for success

According to Jason, in order for the Oxford Houses to be the most effective in treating its residents, it is best if they are located in safe neighborhoods or strong communities.

"Based on our research, the houses work best when they are close to public transportation, have job opportunities, and have other supports such as AA self-help groups. We also have data showing that Oxford House residents do contribute and strengthen their neighborhoods," Jason said. "Our research shows that it is a win-win situation, with communities benefiting from these Oxford Houses, and the support the Oxford House residents receive from their communities help these former substance abusers live more productive and healthier lives."

"Since residents pay all expenses, and there are no professional staff, these types of self-governed settings have important public policy implications for inexpensive approaches for stabilizing individuals with substance abuse histories, especially in an era of cutbacks in funding for a variety of social service programs," said Jason. "Because there is no maximum stay, residents may have a greater opportunity to develop a sense of competence toward maintaining

abstinence.”

There are more than 1,900 Oxford Houses in the United States, and its residents operate each home independently, without help from professional staff.

“Oxford Houses are located in almost every state, and are now spreading to other countries and their allure is that they represent an effective and low cost method of providing community support to prevent relapse,” Jason added.

More about Oxford House at <http://bit.ly/oxfordhs>. More about the Oxford House research team at DePaul is at <http://bit.ly/oxfordtm>.

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