



NEWSLETTER

Spring 2003

Options Celebrates 10 Years of Affordable Housing at The Willows

In March of 2003, we celebrated the ten year anniversary of The Willows Apartments, our first project funded by the HUD 811 Program. It gave us pause to reflect on our history of providing affordable housing which started in 1984 with the purchase and seemingly endless task of rehabbing Carnahan Court. We tend to forget the years before Options became a housing provider and the conditions that led to our seeking federal funding available for adults with mental illness. In those days, low income applicants waited over two years to become eligible for a local HUD certificate that subsidized rent for the few approved rentals units. Many consumers who attended Options' program paid more than half of their monthly income for substandard housing. Residents living in Options housing today pay a third of their income for safe, decent, affordable housing in a supportive atmosphere. A lot has changed in this decade and we are proud to be reminded of our progress.

Options has been designing, funding and managing affordable housing projects for 18 years. In addition to creating the 72 units in the six agency projects, we have collaborated with other nonprofits and assisted in the creation of affordable housing for a variety of special-needs populations including adults with mental illness, homeless youth, drug and alcohol affected adults and victims of domestic violence. These projects are located in Josephine, Jackson, Douglas & Clackamas Counties. We are currently consulting with an agency in Smith River, California to develop multifamily housing for agricultural workers.

We have received over \$4.5 million from various federal, state and local grant sources for the development of these housing projects. The funding for the bricks and mortar represent only part of the story, Options has also received numerous donations from local community groups to support housing efforts and obtained over 2 million dollars as consultants. We have maintained three guiding principles in developing our projects, that they be safe, affordable and attractive. Over the years, we have developed and refined a variety of practical apartment design elements, amenities and layout strategies that have been incorporated in many of the projects

These are challenging and uncertain financial times for agencies like ours. Yet, we move forward with great pride in the fact that this housing resource will remain affordable long into the future and benefit many generations of residents.

This is an "opt-in" newsletter, and if you would prefer not to receive it, let us know by phone, mail or email.

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HEARD 'ROUND THE BOARD TABLE

In answer to the questions “What is it that has kept you involved with Options? What really ‘hooks’ you emotionally? Why do you volunteer on the Board” the following is a sample of what some board members had this to say:

Jim: Options has consistently demonstrated innovative housing solutions that we are not free to explore in the public sector where I work. Options is the third leg in a three legged stool of community resources - public, private and non-profit. I was so impressed from the first time I heard about Options- I thought WOW someone is actually DOING something. Something good! I really liked the agency’s energy and enthusiasm and the uniqueness.

Ralph: I love the community involvement. It gives me an opportunity to give back. I usually function in a totally different world. Volunteering on the board changes my view from the work world to the social, heart side of life and gives me some balance in my life.

Francine: I have long had a fascination with ‘different’ people. I liked Options from the beginning because of their uniqueness, their warmth.....and their brownies! I believe in Options philosophy of empowerment for those who have psychiatric disabilities, helping them become contributing members of the community instead of the warehousing approach. (I admire the employment and the housing approaches) I respect how individuals are treated as (regular) people and that this then results in them acting like (regular) people. The evolution of the Options group has been fascinating...it is the same philosophy as from the start, the form has ‘morphed’, but the same approach still exists today

Felicity: Many years ago when I started in this field, I went from no idea about psychiatric care to working in psych nursing in one of the ‘old style’ hospitals. I had a bad experience working there, it was back when shock therapy was being used. Then I met someone with Turrets syndrome - and it was REALLY interesting. In between cursing and lots of strange side comments, I had this wonderful warm conversation with this lovely, original ‘out of the box’ person. When I interviewed to work for Options, we had a group interview, and it went on for quite a while and had a real family feel to it...it was great. When I worked here I even brought my kids with me. I have memories of “Pat” (who has passed away)...he had such a warm and loving heart, but he was so tortured (by his illness). He really connected with and was a friend to my kids, and gave us a rose plant that still blooms.

Later I worked with the housing alliance and CDC and Options came in like a miracle to take on the affordable housing piece. Lack of affordable housing is a huge gaping hole in the fabric of our society

John: I first worked as a volunteer at Options, but came to feel we were not getting people out in the community enough. I felt we had to throw away the existing ideas about jobs and employment for consumers. I saw the first consumer board form and have watched consumers evolve and move up in the world and recover. That feels so good and empowering for me. I want to continue to be part of that. (It was John who named the Employment Works program.)

Allen: I have a background of 40 years working with low income people who can’t afford a place to live. We worked with CDC, then Options came in like a miracle and went forward. I am so happy to be part of a healthy solution to that suffering.

Options Offers Ready to Rent Classes

Options, in partnership with Josephine County Community Action, is offering a four session series of classes for renters and potential renters in the Grants Pass area with funding provided by Oregon Housing and Community Services Division.

The Ready-to-Rent program is an innovative education program designed by the nonprofit Portland Housing Center with the assistance of landlords, social service agencies, and curriculum specialists. Ready to Rent provides residents who may have barriers to renting a chance to be a successful tenant. It also broadens the market for rental property owners to lower their potential vacancy loss. To earn a Ready-to-Rent diploma, participants attend a four-week housing readiness education class, where they work closely with housing specialists and peers to: accept responsibility for past rental issues, repair their credit, create a workable budget, prioritize housing needs, develop a housing search plan, understand the rental and application process, communicate effectively with their landlord, and fulfill their goal of becoming a successful renter.

The successful launch of the program was enhanced by eager support and cooperative partnership from local social service providers including Women's Crisis Support Team, RCC's Moving On Program, Josephine County Housing Council, Department of Human Services, Gospel Rescue Mission, Southern Oregon Rental Association, Self Sufficiency for Persons with Disabilities and many others.

Options is considering taking the class on the road to Housing Authorities in Coos-Curry, Klamath-Lake, Jackson and Douglas Counties. Initial contact with these housing partners has been met with a welcome response.

NEW BEGINNINGS

June has been involved with Options for about ten years. She first joined the program as a reluctant referral at the direction of her case manager. In those times, consumers participated in a "day program" that was offered four days a week. It was customary for new members to sign on for a 2 week evaluation period during which they were required to attend Options 5 hours a day, 4 days a week. June arrived each morning, eyes downcast with little interest or ability to engage others beyond a muffled greeting. She sat silently with the smokers on the back porch; shoulders slumped, staring at the floor with a fixed, fearful gaze that seemed to quietly defy even the slightest attention from another human being.

June was separated from her teen-age son, who is challenged by developmental disabilities, and lived in a group foster home at the time. She mourned her missing child but was sadly resigned to her seeming inability to nurture and care for him. Staff and fellow consumers reached out to June but were met with the passive, yet resistant expression that defied conversation.

After moving to semi-independent living at Carnahan Court, there was little change in her outward expression but she appeared slightly more relaxed and at ease with others in the house. At the same time her struggle with major depression remained, often resulting in suicidal gestures. She cycled between living at Carnahan and brief but recurring stays in the Crisis Resolution Center. After years of dependency and a kind of learned helplessness June had no sense of personal power; she felt like "things happened to her"

June offered minimal cooperation with treatment but did report an ongoing sense that "things weren't right inside" describing vague pain in her abdomen. Because she was mostly silent and resistant to

personal contact, her physical complaints were not well communicated to her care providers. There was general acceptance by all involved that June was unable to care for her self; let alone her teen-age son.

With time and encouragement from her Case Manager, June found a measure of stability and was finally able to convey her feelings of physical discomfort separate from her emotional issues. A series of medical appointments and tests revealed that she had a badly infected gall bladder that had been toxic for several months. After surgery to remove the infected organ and a reduction in her overall medication June began to visualize a future that included living independently with her son.

Regular meetings with her Case Manager and Employment Works Coordinator helped June to identify obstacles to fulfilling her goals and possible strategies to get over them. For the first time she realized that if she had a job she could afford an apartment. If she had an apartment of her own she could have a home to share with her son. It took months of training and hard work but June identified her own skills for housecleaning and organization. She became a Personal Care Attendant (PCA) and gained the confidence to make phone calls and visit others to offer her skills as a PCA. One job led to another.

After these tentative first steps June recognized that effort and planning were required but she was able to get her needs met by herself. Her confidence grew with the discovery that she could live on her own. She left foster care and within a few months she made arrangements to live independently with her son.

Today, June has been reunited with her son for a year and a half. They are each living full lives within the limitations of their situation. June continues to solicit PCA work and has a special interest in helping people access public transportation. By helping others she helped herself and discovered the value and rewards that come from reaching beyond your perceived limits.

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