



Volunteer Ministry Center
HOPE · HOME · HEALTH

511 North Broadway
Knoxville, Tennessee 37917

P.O. Box 325
Knoxville, Tennessee 37901

(865) 524-3926

www.vmcinc.org

December 23, 2010

Dear Friend of VMC,

The Volunteer Ministry Center has been much in the news of late. I am speaking, of course, about the issue of alcohol in Permanent Supportive Housing, specifically Minvilla Manor. Because we have been so gratified by your support in the past, we think it is important to explain our position to you. I hope that the following points will help.

Board of Directors 2010

Jerry Askew
Charlie Daniel
Elsbeth Freeman
Randy Gibson
Craig Griffith
Eric Haralson
Carney Ivy
David Jones
Ken Knight
Jennifer Luttrell
Frank Maples
Tom McCarley
Chuck Morris
David Murray
Judi Nelson
Sheri Pender
David Rausch
Don Sproles
Mary Frances Tucker
Ned Vickers
Andrea Woods

Ginny Weatherstone
Chief Executive Officer



Participating Agency

- VMC has operated housing for nineteen years. It was called the Jackson Apartments and was located at our old building. We did not have a “No Alcohol” policy there and we operated well without it for nineteen years. Only now is it becoming an issue. In addition, VMC has placed well over three hundred formerly homeless individuals in permanent supportive housing using various KCDC (public housing authority) facilities. None of those apartments has a “No Alcohol” policy either. Experience has taught us that when we know our residents and are in constant communication with them about their situations, we have a real chance of accomplishing something. If they are keeping secrets or hiding things, we do not.
- It is important to understand just what Minvilla Manor is. It is permanent supportive housing; this means that people sign a lease and pay rent. It means that they recognize that they have problems and they are committed to getting help with that (those) problems(s). They agree to work with a case manager on a plan to address those problems. To gain admission to Minvilla, there are strict requirements, personal accountability among them. The potential resident must have already started the process of change and must be recommended for admission by a professional case manager who knows him/her well. A potential resident knows that eviction will result from misbehavior. Minvilla Manor is NOT an alcohol and drug rehab facility. Although we are strongly committed to recovery, we are not a rehab facility. Minvilla Manor is appropriate for people whose drinking can be addressed by outpatient services (AA and case management) and/or people who have already been in inpatient treatment and are working to get better.
- The vast majority of residents at Minvilla are not alcoholic. Several of them are employed. They are working on issues that do not involve alcohol. They might like to come home from work at the end of the day and have a beer. As residents in a private apartment who are paying rent and following the rules, they feel that they deserve that.

December 23, 2010

Page 2

- The secret to the success of our case management relationships is honesty and openness. We want the residents to feel free to come to their case manager and express anxiety about their temptations or acknowledge that they “fell off the wagon” recently. Only then can the case manager help them identify their triggers, find alternative behaviors to “giving in”, or make a referral to a higher level of addiction treatment. The freedom to talk about the addiction is essential to dealing with it in a really effective way.
- Alcoholism is a disability. By law, we cannot discriminate by refusing admission to a known alcoholic. And if we say to an alcoholic that he/she can never drink inside, we are dooming them to leaving the safety of our building, returning to their old drinking buddies and the bad influences of the street. They may get arrested and go to jail, at taxpayer expense, or worse. We know that relapse is part of recovery for an alcoholic. Statistics tell us that the average number of relapses is three, and this figure comes from the general population which includes folks who have strong family support systems. Most homeless people do not have that. An alcoholic, even if he/she has been to inpatient treatment, is likely to relapse at some time. That's why the case management is so important – to make sure a relapse is a relapse and not a slip into a downward spiral.
- Our policies dictate that we react to a person's behavior. If they act in such a way as to violate any apartment rules, they are subject to eviction. We have evicted for this reason in the past and will in the future should that occur.
- And finally, a “No Alcohol” policy is nearly impossible to enforce. We cannot search through grocery bags, etc. as that is a violation of someone's right to privacy. We do not want to have a rule that we cannot enforce.

So there you have it. This is an issue that has, quite frankly, not been an issue for the close to twenty years that we have successfully operated housing. Our approach to permanent supportive housing definitely works. VMC has helped **well over 300 people** into housing; **close to 94%** do not return to the streets! They go on to live more productive lives. That is success. And that is what comes from the dignity of a private apartment coupled with an honest and supportive relationship which is concerned about the resident's welfare.

I understand this is a complicated issue. Many of you may continue to have questions. Please feel free to contact me with those questions. I simply wanted you to know what our thinking is on this issue.

And as always, please accept my thanks for all you do for VMC and those we serve.

Sincerely,



Ginny Weatherstone
Chief Executive Officer