



From RRP to Main Street: Making the Journey to Home

By Kathryn (Katie) Rouse, MSH Operations Manager

You've worked hard on your recovery, developed a network of supports, and learned what wellness tools work best for you. You're ready to leave the Residential Rehabilitation Program (RRP) for the next step of your journey: a home in your community with more independence and new opportunities. Best of all, you're receiving services from a provider agency that fully supports you in this goal and has been working hard to help you find a decent place to live.

There's just one problem...

It's nearly impossible to find.

"Wait lists are five-plus years long. When a consumer is ready to live more independently in the community, most often times there is not appropriate housing available" is how Maureen Carpin, CPRP, Program Manager for [Key Point Health Service's](#) Baltimore City RRP describes it.

Over in Frederick and Prince George's Counties, Jennifer Grinnell, LCPC, Director of Mental Health at [Family Service Foundation, Inc.](#) characterizes the challenge this way: "The housing [in our service area] is not affordable when a one-bedroom apartment costs \$900 a month and you only make \$750 from Social Security. Then, we go into some apartment buildings [that are less expensive] and immediately think 'No! I wouldn't want to live here!' because it's not safe."

Consumers who rely on RRP for housing and providers across the state are facing the same difficult truth that hundreds of low-income households struggle against: there is a critical shortage of decent, affordable housing in Maryland. The [National Low Income Housing Coalition](#) reports that more than 100,000 affordable housing units would need to be created to meet the needs of the 25% of all Maryland renter households surviving on "extremely low income" in 2014. Moreover, the housing that does exist may be overcrowded, very costly or lack of kitchen or plumbing facilities. Between 12-23% of households in each County in Maryland reported having at least one of these "severe housing problems" in the recent [County Health Rankings & Roadmaps](#) study.

If those facts aren't staggering enough, consider that folks coming out of RRP have yet another barrier to overcome: stigmatizing attitudes about people with mental illness. Karl Glocker, LCSW-C, Program Director at [Archway Station, Inc.](#) in Cumberland, MD, gave an example of how he's seen this play out. If housing providers in the community have watched a person struggle with symptoms of mental illness or had legal troubles in the past, they may "not be given a chance... to have a decent living environment in the community" due to a lack of knowledge about how people can and do recover.

Poverty + Stigma Housing is a simple way to describe a complex problem that has significant and lasting impact on the lives of individuals remaining housed in RRP due to the lack of available affordable housing options in the community. Main Street Housing, Inc. offers one part of the solution: an independent, consumer-run organization that develops quality, affordable, independent, long-term rental housing opportunities with supportive Landlord services, leased exclusively to individuals and families with psychiatric disabilities and extremely low income.

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Another critical piece of the puzzle is having recovery-oriented providers dedicated to helping people move through the continuum of care available through the mental health system and back out into their communities. MSH has been fortunate to work in partnership with several RRP providers across the state over the years to help consumers move from RRP into a MSH unit in their community. These providers include Channel Marker and Crossroads Community on the Eastern Shore, Archway Station and Family Service Foundation in Western Maryland, and Alliance, Granite House (Mosaic Community Services),

Humanim, Harbor City Unlimited, Key Point Health Services and Psychotherapeutic Services in Central Maryland.

Housing for Health

It's hard to overcome depression, anxiety and paranoia if you're living with broken windows, leaking ceilings, not enough heat, an infestation of mice or bugs – or worse, if you have to find a new place to sleep every few days. Just having a roof over your head and a door that locks isn't enough, though. How well would you be if you had to sacrifice meals and medicine just to make your rent payment, or if every night is filled with shouting, slamming doors or police sirens?

"It's almost impossible to be successful, healthy and to grow if you're constantly worried about going home to an unstable, unhealthy environment," explained Carpin. The stress of poor quality, unstable housing adds "a level of anxiety to every day that exacerbates mental health symptoms far beyond what they would be if you had [stable housing]," added Grinnell.

If mental health symptoms reach a level of intensity past the limits of what a person's current support system and housing situation can sustain, being admitted to an RRP bed can be a life-saving opportunity. RRP's provide an array of integrated services to help folks learn to manage challenging mental health symptoms in a controlled environment, with both intensive and general levels of support.



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For some individuals, the mandatory service participation and scheduled daily activities of RRP life become overly restrictive as they move forward in recovery. Moving to a home in the community opens up new possibilities that aren't available in service-based housing, where a person is primarily and perpetually identified as a recipient of mental health services. However, the cost, quality and location of that housing play a large role in determining whether or not an individual will have the level of income, independence and access to social networks needed to maintain wellness and create a fulfilling life on their own terms.

A Home Makes All The Difference

When looking for a housing option, mental health consumers' priorities are the same as anyone else's: affordability, quality, location. Can I afford to live here and still have money for food, clothing, transportation, co-pays and to use toward my goals? Is it close enough to a bus stop, or can I walk to the grocery store, my job, the pharmacy and doctors' offices, and the people, places and activities that bring me support, purpose and joy? Is it safe here? Will my Landlord and neighbors treat me with respect and dignity? Could I finally make this my real home?

The importance of quality and location is something Main Street Housing takes seriously. Strict criteria are used when selecting a property to ensure access to community services and affordability to households living on disability income. When it comes to finding Tenants, priority is given to applicants coming directly out of RRP, inpatient facilities and homelessness. As a consumer-run organization, MSH takes a holistic approach that is markedly different from a traditional Landlord. "It has been wonderful working with Main Street Housing and very unique compared to other housing providers," said Carpin. "The time and consideration that is given to each person is remarkable."

Grinnell remembered how "David [Roper, MSH Western Regional Property Manager] went above and beyond to help one of our clients. A lot of Landlords would have looked at our client's paperwork and just said 'No.' MSH was willing to look past the black-and-white paperwork, beyond how much money there was each month and a diagnosis and charges from 20 years ago. David took the time to interview the client and us [as references] to really see the individual, the person who was in need of housing and ready for the opportunity."

MSH's Regional Property Managers, Gloria Bowen (Eastern Region) and David Roper (Western Region), practice "supportive accountability" as they encourage Tenants to take personal responsibility for the core expectations of the Lease Agreement: paying rent on time, keeping the unit in good condition, and being respectful of Co-Tenants and neighbors. The level of communication and flexibility offered by MSH is appreciated by those who have searched for housing with the right mix of independence and support.

"Compassionate and empathetic to people in recovery" is what Glocker heard about MSH from an Archway client who became a MSH Tenant, and added his own experience has been that "MSH tends to treat people with more respect and offer them better opportunities than other housing providers."

The Cost of Being "Stuck"

The "Main Street Model" of housing development was built on the concept that creating a permanent, stable home of your own – where you are a Tenant, not a Patient or a Client – is a transformative experience, especially for folks who have spent a significant amount of time housed through the mental health system. Remaining in restrictive housing placements despite being ready for more independent housing causes a destructive ripple effect both in the lives of individuals and the larger mental health system.

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For the individual, being unable to find a place to call home can actually reverse the progress that had been made in mental health recovery. Grinnell offered this powerful analogy: "getting stuck [in service-based housing] creates that feeling of having no other options, of helplessness, and that can be just like quicksand. If you stop believing that you have options, that there is something better out there for you, you start to feel helpless and that can cause everything else to start falling apart – especially if you are already dealing with depression or [other symptoms]. It takes a lot to pull back up out of that."

The inability to find decent, affordable housing in the community for people ready to move out of RRP alternately creates gridlock and endless cycling through the mental health system, which leads to frustration for everyone involved. Glocker easily identified the most basic barrier on the landscape: "The people that we support [through the public mental health system] tend to have little to no income. This is an unfortunate truth - that people with mental health concerns are pushed to the bottom of society and are not given the financial opportunities that the rest of us sometimes take for granted. Subsequently, many cannot afford decent housing."

He continued, "Many people that have mental health concerns... have been shuffled from one place to another throughout their lives and have never had the opportunity to develop their own home and positive support networks [in] a safe and supportive environment. We need to remember that a person can live a healthy and fulfilling life from mental illness with the proper supports and healthy living environments. This is even more reason why affordable, decent housing is so important for someone to help them overcome their illness."

Main Street Housing applauds the dedicated efforts of those RRP providers who have so actively supported their clients in the transition to life back in the community.