

Occupational Therapy in a Resident Association Housing Community

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The OTPF-3 (2014) expanded the definition of client to include communities. Unfortunately, very little research has been done within the United States to illustrate the possibilities of occupational therapy within a community.

As part of a graduate project, another student and I were offered the opportunity of trying to build a self-sustaining resident association in a local housing community called Fairview in Eastern Tennessee. With no knowledge of the community or what resident associations really were, we did some research. Resident associations give a united voice to the community members and allow a simple communication to be formed between the community and the housing authority. Resident associations also provide a basis for community organizations, groups, educational classes, informational meetings, and a place for people to express ideas or complaints. A 2012 study found that individuals in public housing often develop a sense of learned helplessness exhibited through the feeling that they cannot elicit change in their community (Freedman, Pitner, Powers, and Anderson). Similarly, many community members do not feel a sense of ownership as the lines between the housing authority and community members are blurred. Therefore the need for a healthy and functioning resident association is imperative in bridging the gap. Resident associations give people a voice which helps provide a sense of ownership in the community and can lead to change.

Once we had an understanding of what resident associations were, we did not know where to begin. Leclair (2010) suggests that occupational therapists may need to take on varying roles when trying to help elicit change within a community, sometimes acting as a leader and others as a facilitator. Since we were not members of the community and wanted to create something sustainable, we decided that we would start

some programs as a way to meet people. As we began making connections, we hoped we would find people interested in making changes within the community. These residents would participate and could begin to help us, and then we planned to slowly transition responsibilities over to them. From there, we were hoping to allow them to lead and we would help them as much as we could. Eventually, we wanted to let them lead the community activities on their own.

To ensure that the activities we provided would be of interest to community members, we walked around the community and knocked on doors and spoke with the residents. This not only gave us an opportunity to find out about interests in potential activities, but also gave us a chance to introduce ourselves to the residents of Fairview. We brought some suggestions with us and got a few ideas, like bingo, from some of the people we spoke with. We initially got a lot of positive feedback, especially about kids' programs. When we mentioned we were trying to find people for the resident association we found a handful of people who said they were interested in helping and seemed eager. They mentioned some great ideas and made suggestions as to what we could do, so we were given hope of community interest and involvement. One of the women we spoke with had been a member of the resident association before it dissolved due to lack of membership; a minimum of three members is required with five spots total being offered. She was willing to speak with us and stated, "People around here just aren't interested. I'd been a member for a long time and I just don't care to do it anymore." When pressed a little further she said they used to have good turn outs for Bingo, but that was about it.

Since we were starting in the middle of the school year we decided that homework help offered once a week would be our best option. To advertise, we made fliers and hung them on the doors throughout the neighborhood and spoke with many of the community members. We hoped that by working with kids, we might meet and connect with a few parents.

On the first day, armed with snacks, we arrived with enthusiasm to get started, but not sure what to expect. We consistently got a small group of children who came, some weekly and others sporadically. By the end of the program we had tutored ten children. Unfortunately, though homework help was rewarding for us, we did not meet as many parents as we had hoped and thus were not making the connections needed to jumpstart the resident association.

Over the summer we were able to offer more diverse programs. To try and appeal to more adults, twice a month we offered a recipe sharing class for meals that would feed a family of four for under \$10. Unfortunately, it was not a success, we later learned that there had been some confusion on the wording of the flier and people thought they would have to spend ten dollars to come. After that, we made sure our communication was clear so that we would have the best chance for a good turnout. We also offered Bingo twice a month and had more success in getting adults to come. The only downfall was that none of them were really interested in becoming active members in the resident association.

However, we also tried a different approach by starting a kids program that involved water games, crafts, and other activities that met twice a month. We had a great turn out with twelve kids, which led to us meeting four adults. Two of the adults had been referred to the head of the housing authority because they were interested in possibly

restarting the resident association. The other was a mother and the fourth was someone who had seen us playing outside and came to see what was going on. Two of the women, Darlene and Brenda, became consistent helpers and had a lot of great ideas about programs they thought the community needed. They had great ideas including karaoke night, girls' night at the center, and various other programs. The head of the housing association and I remained in contact throughout the project and she gave Darlene and Brenda a key to the center, as they slowly began taking on leadership roles within the community. They both open the center for and help staff a youth bible study that a local pastor puts on in the center. Darlene helps pass out information and meals to the families getting food support. We met with Darlene and Brenda and discussed the bylaws and responsibilities of the resident association members and to enforce the goal of them taking over fully we tasked them with finding another member to reach the minimum we needed to get the association going. We would try to check in with the ladies once a week, to discuss potential member options, and see how they were enjoying their responsibilities as leaders within the community so far. Occasionally they would report a behavioral problem with some of the children and we would offer suggestions and ideas of how they could handle the situation, always leaving the power in their hands. Unfortunately, they have yet to find a third member though they have found some people interested.

While we were unable to see the resident association fully started we are confident that the Darlene and Brenda will continue serving and eventually find another dedicated member or two to begin the resident association in Fairview again. We learned a great deal from this experience, particularly in the challenges we faced. When

examining lack of participants in the resident association and general attendance of events through the Model of Human Occupation all three factors volition (motivation), habituation (habits and roles), and performance capacity (physical and mental health) issues were evident. Some people were upfront and told us they would like to go but had some performance capacity issues like chronic pain or just hadn't felt up to much since their spouse passed. Other people politely or bluntly expressed disinterest, a clear lack of volition. However, some people seemed genuinely interested, but did not follow through, which were likely in part a combination all the components. The environment in itself being a public housing community, which as stated above often contributes to members feeling a sense of lack of ownership, can influence volition particularly in regards to finding people interested in becoming members of the resident association.

All of these factors not only influenced the attendance of our events, but the individuals' lives in much deeper facets. Many people within the housing community in had difficulty with finding or maintaining work and/or recurring health issues. Occupational therapy has so many tools available to step in and help improve people's quality of life. A community setting provides an incredible insight into how the environment affects things like volition and how a person's individual components affect their environment. Similarly, since we were working within the community we were able to interact with a lot of people and saw opportunities to naturally and effectively work general screenings into our interactions, which could help identify people who would generally slip through the cracks and provide a place of easy access to services that could greatly improve their quality of life.

References

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