



IHN INSIGHTS

An informational newsletter for our Coordinators and Volunteers

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CLIENT RELATIONSHIPS

Emergency Shelter clients are in a constant state of crisis. They have developed a familiarity and comfortability of living day to day and have survived on the life skills that they know. This normalized mentality stems from the family systems that they have been a part of and from the environment in which they were raised. While this is a first time experience of homelessness for some, the majority of our clients have actually been homeless themselves as children. Often times, clients have been in shelters with their parent(s) and sibling(s), have been in the foster care system, or were raised by extended family members.

In a functioning family system, there is respect and love among family members. There are appropriate boundaries, open communication and an emotionally safe environment. There is healthy conflict, encouragement for growth and resiliency. Some clients do have functional relationships with a family member. This person may assist financially or emotionally, or can even offer a client to stay over for the

family's 'weekend pass'. This does not mean that this person can house the family long-term and there are often many layers of assistance needed that the family member is not equipped to deal with.

In a non-functioning family, there may be love but there is no respect. There is unreliability, control, blame and denial. This often directly effects self-esteem and self-respect. One of the biggest hardships that we see is a lack of an emotionally safe environment. Clients have often been discouraged or shamed when expressing feelings and thoughts. This is a consistent pattern in clients who have suffered abuse and neglect as children. This instills a fear of expressing emotions and may suppress experiences and feelings that need to be discussed in order to develop proper coping skills. It takes months for case managers to gain the trust of clients and we are always sensitive to their past experiences and relationships.

Identifying the functional and non-functional family systems of each client is important in identifying roadblocks to progress. The most identifiable roadblock in a non-functional family is co-dependency. We see this among our in-tact couples, as well as with extended family members. We also see this among parents and their children.

An example: A mother and father are in the shelter with their two children. Both parents are recovering substance abuse addicts who used together for over ten years. They have been homeless together before and they have been each other's only support system. They

have developed co-dependent coping skills to get them through their crisis situations and have difficulty functioning separately due to the reliance that they have on each other. Dad has been in a recovery program and sober for three years. Mom feels that she does not need to be in recovery and states that she is not using. Mom tests positive for an illegal drug and is asked to leave the shelter. Dad and the children continue in the shelter program. The couple is so co-dependent that Dad misses case management appointments and spends his days trying to contact Mom to make sure that she is not using drugs. The children's needs go unmet and Dad develops anxiety of the unknown actions of Mom, which ultimately impedes any progress for the family.

How does IHNSC help clients cope with their experiences and relationships? We do this in three ways:

1. Sound Minds – Our Sound Minds mental health counseling program is crucial to providing crisis intervention, counseling and mental health recommendation for both children and adults. Each client is given the opportunity to address their life experiences in the hopes of developing healthy coping skills and techniques. This allows clients to begin to heal their pasts while being equipped with tools for their future relationships. Our mental health counselor is Elyse Schoepp. Elyse has years of experience in crisis intervention and meets with our families once a week.

2. Case Management – Everyday our case managers are working with clients on life skills, such as parenting and self-esteem. Implementing and evaluating individual case plans are important in addressing roadblocks to progress.
3. Volunteers – Our congregations and volunteers play a HUGE role in our clients' lives. You are providing a safe and judgement-free environment. Our clients have the opportunity to observe kindness and generosity. For many clients, this is the first time experiencing this and it restores the faith that they have in their community and promotes human dignity.

THE IHNSC INTAKE PROCESS

Anyone seeking emergency shelter in Somerset County must visit the Somerset County Board of Social Services to apply for assistance. There are three social service locations in the County: Somerville, Somerset and North Plainfield. Bridgewater Municipality also has its own emergency housing department. Social Services decides which shelter to refer families to based on their needs. IHNSC then receives a faxed referral with pertinent family information.

The IHNSC staff recently toured the new Somerville social service location with the goal of understanding what a family goes through when asking for emergency assistance.

Requesting assistance is an extremely stressful time for families.

A typical story - picture this...

You are a single parent who has two children under the age of five. You had been renting an apartment that you were barely able to maintain between paying for childcare, rent and household expenses. You have been employed for the past two years at a local grocery store but they never give you enough hours to make you full time. You were three months behind in rent when you received a notice of eviction. You can't understand how you got here since you tried your hardest to provide food and basic needs to your children. You pack up what you can and leave the rest behind.

In a panic, you reach out to your small support system to maintain a level of familiarity. After a few weeks, you have been asked to leave your friend's house where you have been sleeping on the couch with your children. While your friend has been supportive, she has a family of her own and has gently suggested that you have worn out your welcome. You make the intimidating decision to contact your local social services for emergency assistance. You go there with everything you own and your children. They haven't slept well since they had left their own rooms and are crying. You are tired. You are emotionally exhausted. You are then told to sit in a waiting room with many other people. You wait for hours.

You are then asked for proof of identification for all members of your family. You can't remember where your children's birth certificates are. Did you leave them behind in your apartment? Are they in one of your suitcases? You can't

think straight at this point. You are given papers to sign and are told that a shelter will contact you when there is an opening. When will there be an opening? Where do you go in the meantime? They place you in a motel temporarily. You live out of your suitcases since you could be told to leave at any time so unpacking would not make sense. Thank goodness that the motel is within walking distance to the local grocery store since you do not have your license. Your room does not have a microwave so you heat your children's food up in the motel lobby. You spend the next few days at social services making sure they get all of your documentation and you plead with your boss to give you a few days to figure out when you can go back to work due to your situation instead of firing you.

Then you get a call and it is IHNSC!

I initiate the first contact with the potential client and an interview day is set up for the family to visit the shelter and learn about our program. My initial interview with families is a very emotional time for them. They come to our day center not knowing what to expect. They come with a history of mistrust due to damaged relationships that have shaped the way that they communicate and function. It truly takes a giant leap of faith for families to trust in our word that we will provide for them when they have been let down by so many people before us. I always tell potential clients that they know their family better than I do and they have to make the best decision for their family. We never want to set a family up for failure if they acknowledge that they do not think this is the right setting for them. If a family chooses not to come into the shelter, they are referred back to social services for other housing options. More often than not, clients recognize their need for structure that IHNSC has to offer and these are the clients who ultimately come into our program.

Our Director of Volunteer Services, Karen Donohue, then sets up the logistics for the family to enter IHNSC on the upcoming Sunday. Food allergies are identified and communicated to the host congregations. Needs are evaluated and transportation is set up. When clients arrive on Sunday, they are greeted by our Weekend Support Staff, Roberta Snead, who assists the client in settling in. Clients then go to their first night of shelter at the host congregation, where they are welcomed by the many generous volunteers who support our mission!

NO SHOW CLIENTS

I am sure that every congregation can relate to this. You are told a new family will be coming in on Sunday during your host week. You make arrangements for more volunteers, more food and more space. Sunday comes and goes and the new family does not show up. Why does this happen when we have so much to offer families? Sometimes it is hard to understand why families choose not to come without even a phone call to let us know. In my experience, the main contributors to this are due to a lack of trust and the fear of the unknown. Up until this point they have slept in their cars and on couches of relatives and friends. While certainly not ideal situations, these are somewhat known circumstances. Families will exhaust all other options before they apply for emergency housing assistance. Many times, a family member or friend will allow the family to stay with them at the very last second when they realize that the family will be going to a homeless shelter. This generosity, while well intended, is a temporary solution to the family's needs and we often see duplicate referrals come to us months later that the family is in need once again.

A DAY IN THE LIFE

In order to truly walk in each other's shoes, it is important to highlight the experiences of the various roles within our IHN network. From volunteers to staff to clients, we are each experiencing different emotions and responsibilities. This issue features Jennifer, our undergraduate Bachelor of Social Work

intern from Rutgers University. Jennifer has been at IHNSC since September 2016 and will complete her 450 hours of senior field work in April 2017. She will then move on to pursue her Masters of Social Work Degree at Rutgers University.

A day in the life of an IHN intern...



There are days when I walk into the office and will not know what to expect but can I honestly say that I enjoy it.

A day for me at IHN is walking in to clients who are eager to fill me in on how their weekends went. I sit down in the living room area and listen to their stories, one more excited than the next to have my time and attention. I may get called to go visit a client's home and meet with them on various case management tasks. I assist in case management sessions, go over monthly reviews, work on setting new goals and help clients study for their GED. Towards the end of the day, the children will return from childcare or school and I will interact with them and assist them in getting ready for the bus to the congregation.

As an intern I am primarily responsible for assisting in case management sessions. I participate in interviewing new clients, completing intake forms, writing case notes, reviewing client files, assisting in crisis situations, brainstorming interventions and discharge planning.

My experience at Interfaith Hospitality Network of Somerset County has been great in that it has been a starting point in my career as a social worker. The most important tools I have used are observing, listening and never fearing to ask questions. I have learned that each client is unique. I have become comfortable by communicating to clients that I am sure I will learn from them and hope that they can learn from me. I remind them that they are not alone and I will help them step by step to achieve their goals.

CLIENT UPDATES

Current Shelter Rotation

Kiara recently passed her driving learners permit test! She now has a short time to practice for her road test. She is also studying for her GED. Joseph is really enjoying and thriving while at childcare.

Kai has become employed! She will work within program hours, while Na'ima and Adrian attend childcare.

Maria has started a work program, while Josef attends childcare. Brittany, Christopher, Aurianny and Alexa continue to work hard at school. Staff always looks forward to their smiling faces after school.

Recent Rotation:

Sarita and Kashaad have moved in to their own apartment! Many generous donors assisted with furnishing their apartment. Thank you to everyone who donated, it was truly humbling for both Sarita and staff to see such generosity.

Next Issue: July 2017

Supported in part thanks to:

