

Success in Supportive Housing – Youngdahl Living Since 2012

“There is a destiny that makes us brothers; no one goes his way alone. All that we put into the lives of others comes back into our own”. This saying is printed on the community room wall at Youngdahl Living, a 16 unit permanent supportive housing complex in Owatonna. The words are there to honor the legacy of the building namesake, former Governor Luther W. Youngdahl. However, they are a daily message of the importance of community to the tenants, staff and visitors. The phrase, from a poet Edwin Markham, was used at Youngdahl’s retirement ceremony many years ago.

In January 2012, after four years of fund raising and one year of building, Youngdahl Living opened with a mission statement to “promote access for individuals with serious mental illness to housing with supportive services that are: based on individual’s needs, preferences and desires; safe, decent and accessible to transportation; flexible in terms of locations, intensity and schedule; effective to help individuals access and maintain housing.” Since that time, tenants have included 36 people between the ages of 19 and 56, including 24 from Steele County, 5 from Waseca County and 4 from Dodge County. Tenants are adults 18 and over. Some may have children, who can visit for limited periods of time, but not live there permanently. All units have leases and Fair Housing laws apply. Tenants pay a percent of their income toward rent and must be low income to be eligible for rent subsidies. All must complete background checks for criminal and credit history. This screening allows us to decline those who pose a risk to others and/or the facility. All apartments are one-bedroom, with kitchens, allowing tenants to do their own cooking.

The idea for Youngdahl Living grew out of a regional need for permanent housing options for those with mental illness and homelessness who had been through multiple stays at hospitals, community treatment facilities, shelters, and have not attained health and housing stability. Planning involved representatives from MNPrarie, Owatonna HRA, South Central Human Relations Center (SCHRC), and counties of Southeast Minnesota. And where did the Youngdahl name come in? Governor Youngdahl was known during his time in office (1947 – 1951) to be a passionate supporter of the rights of those with mental illness. One of his more newsworthy acts occurred on Halloween evening in 1949.

<http://mn.gov/mnddc/past/pdf/40s/49/49-SGL-Youngdahl.pdf> That night, on the grounds of the Anoka State Hospital, he lit a bonfire and burned 359 strait-jackets. He said: “As little as eighteen months ago all but one of our mental hospitals used mechanical restraints. Today most are restraint free. The bonfire which I am lighting tonight consists of 359 strait-jackets, 196 cuffs, 91 straps, and 25 canvas mittens.” ...; ***“what this bonfire symbolizes tonight will carry on in public thinking until every last thing is done to make the state hospital truly a house of hope for those most misunderstood...”*** The Youngdahl family allowed us to use this name.



Governor Youngdahl

Youngdahl has a “housing first” approach. This offers permanent, supportive housing as quickly as possible to individuals experiencing homelessness, and then provides the supportive services and connections to community-based resources people need to keep their housing and avoid returning to homelessness. Services are offered, but are not required. We find that most tenants do accept services. Services in Housing First are offered through a harm reduction philosophy, in a non-judgmental manner and from a client-centered position. Supports are provided on site or off site, and there is an expectation that individuals served through the intervention will access a broader range of community resources, have meaningful daily activities, and work towards greater independence and improved life satisfaction. The skills worker in Housing First can expect to model and teach skills ~~and~~ in tenant’s apartment and in the community. Skills workers may have one-on-one time with tenants to teach things like budgeting, cooking, cleaning, laundry, grocery shopping, and the like. A bus stop is nearby and tenants use that to get to appointments in the community such as working with human services, shopping, doctor appointments.

The Youngdahl Living mission statement led to setting goals about stable housing, stable mental health and chemical health, and physical health. Results from March of this year are: 80% of the tenants remained in housing for 6 consecutive months or longer, 94% of tenants reduced use of acute care (Emergency Departments/Hospitals) by over 50%, and 100% of the tenants completed a health assessment by a registered nurse within 45 days of moving in.

What works here? Why has living at Youngdahl made a positive impact for the tenants? These are some of the things that we hear: “ I feel safe here - It took me a while to believe this was real, and that I’d be able to stay, but I’ve been able to work on mental health and chemical problems, knowing I have a place I can stay. – They promote a sense of community and family here - Youngdahl has given my family a huge sense of security that they know I’m finally in a safe place where I can work hard to succeed. – Since being here, I’ve been able to stay sober, have more stable mental health, but also cook for myself freely and as a result lose pounds.”

The successes of Youngdahl have brought statewide attention and now the model is being repeated in Winona. Hiawatha Valley Mental Health Center and other stakeholders will break ground in September on “Hiawatha Bluffs”, a 20 unit apartment complex using similar grant-based construction funding. They also plan to serve adults who have mental health, chemical health and homelessness. In a recent survey by the Minnesota Department of Human Services, our area of Southeast Minnesota ranked above many other areas of the state for providing permanent supportive housing. By providing this resource, we offer a respectful, effective tool so people can re-gain their lives. Mental illness is not a choice. And who of us does not need a home?

Editor’s Note: Carolyn Wheeler is a Licensed Independent Clinical Social Worker, and Executive Director at South central Human relations Center.



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