



TRANSITION HOUSE; *SHELTER CO-OP*

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WHAT IS TRANSITION HOUSE?

- ❖ Transition House is a non-profit in Cambridge, MA that aims to end the cycle of domestic violence in our community through advocacy, education, and community outreach
- ❖ Transition House has four main programs that support survivors of domestic violence and their families that include:
 - ✓ **Emergency Shelter**: Houses up to 9 families, with a family being a parent and up to 3 children, for 3 months. During their stay, clients have access to case management and advocacy, mental health care, and housing search support
 - ✓ **Transitional Living Program**: 4 scatter site apartments that house survivors of domestic violence and their children (up to 2 children, because clients have roommates in this program) for 20 months. During their stay, clients have access to housing search support, advocacy and mental health care, and case management, with the benefit of having their own apartment in the interim
 - ✓ **Permanent Supported Housing**: 5 scatter site apartments that house survivors of domestic violence with a documented disability and their children. These clients stay in the apartments until a time comes when they have access to permanent housing outside of the program, which could be years. These clients and their families have access to the same services as the other programs

WHAT IS TRANSITION HOUSE? (CONT'D)



TRANSITION HOUSE

❖ **Community Program:** A team of advocates who work with residents of Cambridge who are not currently enrolled in any program through Transition House.

The community advocates offer safety planning to community members trying to leave abusive situations, they offer advocacy and support with community members are in court with their abuser (whether it be for a restraining order, custody hearings, etc.) and finally, if a space in a program opens that a community advocate feels one of their clients will benefit from, the team member can advocate for that client to be entered in our program.

JOB RESPONSIBILITIES

- ❖ Answer the 24/7 domestic violence hotline and offer information and support to those calling, as well as answering the direct shelter line and connecting callers with the appropriate party
- ❖ Offer support to clients staying in the emergency shelter through emotional support, advocacy, and ensuring they have physical items to maintain well-being (food, clothes, hygiene products, etc)
- ❖ Maintain an accurate shift report of the days events so as to be able to use the report to look back on the ways in which clients interacted one another and staff, as well as to ensure no rules are being broken
- ❖ Log, track use of, and reconcile petty cash flows from both the shelter cash and clinical programs cash to see how money is being utilized, how much is being spent, and how essential this money is to the daily operation of the shelter

SPECIAL RESPONSIBILITIES

- ❖ Support in the planning, preparation, and execution of Transition House's 40th Anniversary celebration, the "40 Stories" campaign
 - ✓ Speak with local business owners to try to obtain donations for the event, i.e., food, drinks, discounted framing and mounting of the photographs for the event
 - ✓ Help with cleaning and preparing the shelter to become an art installation for a night, featuring photographs highlighting the work that Transition House does – aid survivors of domestic violence
 - ✓ Direct guests throughout the shelter the night of the event to show videos of DV survivors speaking about how Transition House helped them get back on their feet. The exhibit also featured employees of Transition House talking about the work that they do and the impact they hope to make
 - ✓ Aid in the clean up of the shelter to bring it back to it's original layout for the clients that are living there
- ❖ Aid the Clinical Director in running the shelter programs while the Director of the Shelter was out on medical leave. This involved me taking on more "head on" responsibility for 1.5 months to ensure the shelter continued to run as smoothly as possible

Below: Photo taken at our "40 Stories" event that was held at our shelter to promote Transition House, our mission, and show the community the impact that Transition House makes.



WHAT I HOPED TO GAIN

- ❖ Through this co-op, I wanted to gain a better understanding of the types of services that are offered to individuals and families who are struggling. My time at Transition House has been very influential in my understanding of the broader network of agencies that offer services.
- ✓ Aside from the other Domestic Violence agencies in the Boston area that I learned about, I was also exposed to the Department of Children and Families (DCF) and how they impact our clients emotional and mental well-being, because an open DCF case can put an immense amount of stress on families.



- ❖ I also hoped to gain more confidence in terms of speaking with people that I had never met. This confidence was gained by speaking with contractors for the shelter as well as by performing in-person intakes with new clients entering the shelter.

WHAT I WISH I'D HAVE KNOWN AT THE BEGINNING

- ❖ I wish I would have known how difficult it would be to say goodbye to our clients as they leave the shelter. The shelter stay is only 3 months, with extensions being given periodically as seen fit (but not often), but when working closely with these families and wanting to see them succeed, it becomes incredibly hard to see them move on.
 - ✓ However, I will say that it is often exciting to see clients leave to new, better, chapters of their lives, but when a family is forced to move onto another shelter, that is when it is difficult to say goodbye because as an agency I believe the majority, if not all, employees want to see our clients succeed.
- ❖ I also wish I would have known how difficult some clients would be. This was my second co-op, and both co-ops were in social service fields, but I was more involved in decisions during this co-op. Because of this, some clients believed that I had too much authority to make decisions that I could not make, and because of this judgement, some clients viewed me as someone who was “not on their side” and as someone who wanted badly to see everyone who came through our doors over those six months succeed, that was very difficult to deal with.
 - ✓ With the support of other staff members, though, I was reassured that we were doing everything we could for these clients and that we were sending them to new shelters with the tools to continue searching for permanent housing and permanent support systems.

CHALLENGES

There were daily challenges on co-op that involved disputes between clients, between clients and staff, and the challenge of handling clients who were struggling with PTSD and types of trauma.

The biggest challenge I faced while on co-op was having a very argumentative client in the shelter for 90 days. Nearing the end of her stay, this client decided that we had not done anything for her despite our numerous attempts at supporting her.

During her last days at the shelter this client started a few heated arguments with both staff and other clients and she had been triggering other clients with her arguments. While this was difficult to hear, because we did try to offer her as many services as we could, I feel that this challenge was resolved by my, and the entire team's, continued efforts to support her through her difficult transition.



CHALLENGES (CONT'D)

Another general challenge I had while on co-op revolved around working with children. I had never worked closely with children prior to this co-op, and while at Transition House I worked closely with children ranging in age between 6 months and 16 years old. One of the activities I was able to plan for them was a series of art classes, that were therapeutic and well-received.

While this was a challenge for me, this opportunity allowed me to expand my knowledge base in the field I plan to enter professionally. This was definitely one of the more difficult challenges to adjust to, but entirely worth it in the end.



LEARNING NEW SKILLS

❖ A skill that I developed while on this co-op that I had not had previously was the ability to respectfully pry for more information from a client. Given the nature of this work, some of these stories were hard to tell, but as an agency we can better serve clients if we know their history.

For example, a major part of my job was screening potential incoming clients when we had a room opening. This screening process required speaking with a potential client and asking them about their history, including what types of abuse they endured, when the abuse happened, where the abuse happened, how were their families/children affect, etc. These can be, and usually are, very difficult conversations for people to have with someone they had never met, let alone doing this over the phone.

❖ I learned different tactics to allow people to feel comfortable telling me these sensitive details over the phone, never having met me, including allowing them to take as much time as they need, offer support when they sound too overwhelmed to finish their sentence, as well as comprehensively explaining why we need to know this information (to ensure their safety)

PERSONAL GROWTH

- ❖ While on co-op, I learned that I like to be left to finish what I need to finish without too many people checking in with me. I found that a check-in every once in a while was helpful, but I did not like or want people consistently asking what I was doing.
- ❖ I also found that I enjoy working with multiple people. Working in groups is helpful to me, especially in the social service field, because I found that sometimes a problem does not have one definite answer. I found that many problems that arose during my time at the shelter, such as conflicts between clients or where a client was going to move when their time had come to a close, were most easily solved by three or more people.
- ❖ I have also discovered that when I am given agency to start new projects, I am more confident in my work. I was given the opportunity to lead workshops with the children, and some adults, at the shelter that were popular among clients. Prior to this co-op I was not so sure that I would have the confidence to lead a workshop, but I am glad my supervisors gave me the chance to take the lead and try something new I ended up loving.

ETHICAL DILEMMAS

- ❖ While on co-op, there were a few times where I faced ethical dilemmas regarding staff-client relationships. I was approached by a few clients who were asking for cash, which we are not allowed to give out of personal pocket. When I said no, this client continued to ask why, she was going to pay me back, etc. but I had to hold my ground because of the boundary that needs to exist between clients and staff in this field.
- ❖ Another staff-client boundary dilemma I noted was the amount of clients asking to add me on Facebook. Many clients, when leaving the shelter, wanted to find me on Facebook to keep in touch, but this again was regarded as unethical by the organization. I agree with this standpoint, because in a situation where you know someone's personal, financial, and housing history in a professional setting, if we were to move into a personal friendship with this information it could mean trouble for both myself, the client and Transition House should the relationship sour.

NEXT STEPS



Working for Transition House has allowed me to see that my plans for post-graduate life are not out of reach. Transition House has allowed me to see that I certainly want to remain in this field and get my masters in Social Work.

More specifically, I would love to continue to work with disadvantaged populations, though more specifically with teenagers and young adults. I would love to be able to work with these population in a large city where the services that are unique to that age group are so badly needed, and unfortunately not often provided.

Transition House has shown me that they are exemplary in their approach to tackling social issues, and I truly want to continue this mission in my own way, with the populations that I am extremely driven to serve.

INEQUALITY

My time at Transition House opened my eyes to the different ways in which inequality is manifested in our communities.

❖ The biggest instance of inequality that I saw while on co-op was the inequality that a client in the shelter faced. This client is a transgendered person, and she was being denied Domestic Violence priority on the public housing lists. The agencies said this was because she could not prove her abuse happened recently, but after documentation was provided this person was still being denied.

This was eye-opening because, while I have heard of discrimination against LGBTQ people, I have never seen it with my own eyes. This can be because I identify as a straight woman, and my social circle is particularly accepting of all people, so while I have many LGBTQ people in my life, I have simply never seen such blatant discrimination against a person who so badly needed services solely because they identified as trans.



INEQUALITY

Not only did I see inequality in the ways our LGBTQ clients were treated, I also saw this with clients who did not speak English.

❖ While on co-op, we helped quite a few clients who did not have English speaking capabilities. These individuals were more often than not left by the way side when it would come to job interviews, housing interviews, etc. We had one Spanish speaking client while I was on co-op who had missed several opportunities to move onto permanent housing because when it came down to it, there were no interpreters, or not enough of them, to help her with applications, interviews, etc.

When this client came to Transition House she was surprised and excited to see how much effort her case manager** was putting into her case, because in previous “general” homeless shelters (not DV specific) there had been little to no assistance provided to her to inform her of the different forms and applications you need to fill out to get DV priority with the public housing system.

***Upon completing my co-op I stayed on at the shelter as a part time relief employee. I was still at the shelter 5 days a week, and while in this new position, I learned that this case manager crossed the professional line between client/case worker in a very graphic way. While this news was shocking to the entire agency, and this case manager was immediately terminated, it was an opportunity to see that even as a successful agency, things can still slip through the cracks if everyone stays quiet about them. It was very interesting to see first hand how something so serious effected the entire staff, how we handle client concerns, and how this incident led to a more clear understanding, and stricter enforcement, of the client/case manager boundary.*

CONCLUSION

By the end of my co-op, I had seen many people come through the shelter (some clients did not stay the full 3 months, so I saw quite a few different clients come through) and I have heard all of the stories they were willing to share. My time at Transition House has completely changed the way I view domestic violence, in the sense that I now know the many different forms it takes, and the mark it leaves on those affected by it. Transition House has shown me that I am capable to provide meaningful care to the populations who need it most, and that has been the most personally fulfilling part of my co-op.

Transition House has also shown me that while we, as a society, have changed so much about our culture and the way we view other people. By the same token, working at Transition House has also opened my eyes to the many different ways in which we as a society still need to improve so that all can live in a healthy, productive, and safe environment so they can thrive. Finally, Transition House has shown me that the world is in desperate need of people who love this work, because there are simply not enough people working in these fields to affect real change on the world, and I happy to say that I plan to continue working for incredible organizations like Transition House in the future.