

Issues Raised About "Our House"

by Earl Willis and Cynthia Janes

Since January, three residents of "Our House," the WNCAP facility for persons with AIDS (PWA's), have moved out, including the manager. All three have moved to private apartments and are paying significantly more in rent than they paid at Our House. All three are sure they made the right decision to move out of Our House.

Hundreds of hours of volunteer time went into readying Our House for occupancy. The majority of those hours, it is safe to say, were donated by members of the gay/lesbian community. Every room was painted, the bannister between first and second floors completely stripped of paint and refinished, a new roof put on, the outside of the house painted, a new doorway added, plaster extensively repaired, and a great deal of yard work and landscaping done.

The house is in good shape, and PWA's can live there at less than half the cost of an apartment. Yet at present, the house has only two residents, and both are from other states. Since opening in May, 1990, Our House has reached its capacity of five residents only once, and very briefly. David, a PWA who has not lived in the House, said, "I was invited to move in, but I could already see the friction there, and I didn't want any part of it."

In order to qualify to live at Our House, a person must be able to live independently, and may require subsidized housing. Those who have lived there report that they moved into Our House primarily for financial reasons. Why have they moved out?

Each of three former residents, Bill, Tom, and Rick, told *Community Connections* that one of the primary considerations for them was that they wanted more privacy than they could get at the facility. For Rick, it was only the lack of privacy that led him to move. "I can't really see anything wrong with the house. I enjoyed myself there, but I just didn't have the privacy there that I wanted. The house was comfortable, and it was nice. But I couldn't be me."

But two of the former residents listed a host of complaints ranging from their belief that residents are not all treated equally, to excessive rules, and to their voices not being heard by WNCAP. "They need to treat PWA's as human beings," Tom said. "I feel like there's lots of discrimination out there, and the PWA's have no voice." Bill charged, "They don't assess whether it's a good environment for somebody or not. They pay very little attention to the individual."

WNCAP Executive Director Brenda Youngblood told *Community Connections* that, at present, there are no plans to make any changes at Our House. She said that Our House will be given "an honest chance" to work, "at least a full year of operation," before any changes are considered.

Concerned about developments at Our House, WNCAP's Housing Committee met in February and again in March. The Housing Committee had met once before, in September, since the House had been occupied. According to the WNCAP Board of Directors' list of standing committees, the Housing Committee is "responsible for reviewing and responding to housing needs for PWA's and WNCAP's need to provide housing."

In their February meeting, the Housing Committee discussed concerns about Our House. They wanted to know how potential residents of Our House felt

about the facility, how they perceived their future housing needs, and what housing preferences they had. The committee thought that the best way to do this was by means of a questionnaire, which they planned to distribute to as many HIV+ individuals in the gay community as possible.

Members of the Housing Committee then developed a questionnaire which covered respondents' financial status, the types of housing they would prefer if and when they needed help with housing (e.g., apartment vs. single room occupancy as in Our House), and attitudes about Our House.

The Housing Committee met again March 14 at Highland Hospital. *Community Connections* was present at that meeting, which was attended by committee members Star Nolan (Chair), Joan Marshall, Carlos Gomez, Ray Clarke, Carol Latharus, and Tony Clark-Sayer, and WNCAP Director Youngblood. Bill Allen and Bill Bednarek attended as invited guests.

Marshall introduced the questionnaire, and some general discussion about it followed. Then Youngblood said that she had forgotten the Housing Committee was doing this project. (The project had been discussed at the previous meeting.)

Arguing against distribution of the questionnaire, Youngblood said, "The Board doesn't feel that we should flood

people with surveys especially since the Board is in the process of conducting a survey of its own."

Star Nolan, Chair of the Housing Committee, stated that they didn't want to duplicate the work of the WNCAP Board with the questionnaire. "We hoped that because our focus was specifically on housing, the need for it, and attitudes about housing, that it would be different [from the Board's survey]."

Youngblood then informed the Housing Committee that the Executive Committee of the Board was assuming full responsibility for Our House and that the Housing Committee need not concern itself further with policies concerning the House.

Clarke said if that were the case, there was no need for the housing committee to exist, and it should be dissolved and cease consuming volunteers' time. "Apparently our function has been usurped by the Executive Committee," Clarke said.

manager of Our House, got up and left in anger, saying that he had other things to do. The turn of events "doesn't surprise me," Allen said.

Latharus said that she and Joan Marshall and other people on the committee were among the original workers on Our House and had done a lot

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