

# *Oxford House – Celebrating 50 Years*



## *Oxford House – The Model*

*15<sup>th</sup> Oxford Houses of Virginia State Convention*

*Richmond, VA*

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***Rescued Lives: The Oxford House Approach to Substance Abuse*** was published July 2008. The book by Leonard Jason, Bradley Olson and Karen Foli has received the following early reviews:

"With both passion and detail, the authors chronicle the extraordinary social forces that shaped the revolutionary Oxford House Movement. In doing so, they show why the pursuit of elegantly designed, but de-contextualized approaches to drug treatment often fall short, and how a more contextualized, peer-centered approach can bring about long-term recovery."

**Jean Rhodes**

Professor of Psychology  
University of Massachusetts, Boston

"*Rescued Lives: The Oxford House Approach to Substance Abuse* offers value for two diverse audiences. For those involved in addiction treatment, it provides a clear, concise, and vivid presentation of a novel, effective, and cost-efficient approach. For community psychologists, it offers a fine illustration of a program that puts into action several of the discipline's core concepts, including social support, self-help, empowerment, tolerance for

and promotion of diversity, and psychological sense of community. A stimulating and compelling brand of powerful first-hand vignettes and solidly designed quantitative and qualitative research."

**David Glenwick, PhD**

Professor of Psychology  
Fordham University

"Remarkable ... ***Rescued Lives*** cogently combines personal experience, exhaustive research, and clear descriptions to tell the story of the Oxford House approach for treating substance abuse, especially alcoholism ... insightful ... demonstrates what effective university-community partnerships can accomplish in understanding an important phenomenon over a sustained period of time ... Offers challenges to the conventions that have produced a costly, ineffective health care system for treating addiction ... A better future for substance abuse treatment starts with reading ***Rescued Lives***."

**Chris Keys, PhD**

Professor Emeritus and Former Chair  
Department of Psychology  
University of Illinois at Chicago

*Rescued Lives: The Oxford House Approach to Substance Abuse* is available from Amazon or directly from the publisher Routledge. Simply go on line and put Routledge into Google and then put either the book title or author [Jason] in the search window. The price of the book is \$29.95 plus shipping. It is a good read and tells the story of Oxford House well.

Many of the scholarly research articles published by the DePaul group are downloadable by clicking on "Publications/Evaluations/DePaul" on our website: [www.oxfordhouse.org](http://www.oxfordhouse.org).

See inside of back page for information concerning an earlier publication by the DePaul group that reports on specific studies of Oxford House done by them over the last 14 years.

*Oxford House – Celebrating ( \$  
Years*

## Recovery Homes for Recovering Alcoholics and Drug Addicts

### Oxford House—The Model

The Federal Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1988, P.L. 100-690, required each State to establish a revolving fund to make loans to six or more recovering individuals to rent houses to use as self-run, self-supported group homes that are alcohol and drug free. The law was based on the then thirteen- year experience of the national network of self-help Oxford Houses. Today, after 62 years experience, there are more than 1,000 Oxford Houses throughout the United States.

This paper explains how to start self-run, self-supported recovery houses in your state. It is a simple concept, based on the Oxford House experience, and provides a cost-effective way to help thousands of individuals recovering from alcoholism and drug addiction to avoid a return to addiction by living a comfortable life without the use of alcohol and drugs. Recovering individuals living together in the disciplined environment of an Oxford House in a good neighborhood are almost always able to help each other stay clean and sober without relapse.

The requirement that states have recovery home revolving loan funds is now permissive but many states continue them. In other areas, various groups have established similar start-up funds. In other places, recovering individuals themselves simply put together three or four thousand dollars to help get a new house started.



#### Characteristics of Oxford Houses

Oxford House, Inc. is a network of self-run, self-supported recovery houses. It is not part of Alcoholics Anonymous or any other group, but its members rely on AA and similar self-help programs for additional outside support. In its first twelve years [1975-1987], it expanded quietly from one house to thirteen houses without any outside financing. Following enactment of the Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1988, Oxford House, Inc. established an expansion program utilizing trained outreach workers and the small start-up loan program available under the new law. Now there are more than 1,000 Oxford Houses throughout the United States. Most residents of Oxford Houses have become comfortably clean and sober even though they had often failed in the past. This paper describes how self-run, self-supported Oxford Houses are established and maintained following a disciplined democratic system of operations.

Oxford House, Inc. does not own property. It simply encourages groups of recovering individuals to rent houses and become affiliated with the Oxford House, Inc. network of individual houses. Such affiliation brings with it the Oxford House System, which is not difficult to learn but is very effective. The Oxford House System fosters democratically run group housing and an operating framework tailor-made for the individual recovering from alcohol or drug addiction.

By the time many persons addicted to alcohol or drugs get serious about recovery, they have lost their normal living accommodations or at best made their living in them very difficult. Going home becomes either impossible or risky for continued recovery. Oxford House can provide a transitional home between early recovery and past homes or new homes. It can also provide a permanent home for those who decide that they prefer living in a supportive group environment to living alone.

Since Oxford House is democratically run and self-supported, the members living in an Oxford House vote to determine if an applicant for membership is accepted.

When an individual is accepted for membership in an Oxford House, there is no time limit on how long he or she can live there, but use of alcohol or drugs or non-payment of rent will result in expulsion. That simple policy lies at the heart of what Oxford House is and what makes it work.

Recovering individuals interested in self-run, self-supported recovery houses have two options. If they are in an area where Oxford Houses already exist, they should investigate the possibility of admission to one of those houses. Applications for residence are available at each house. If there is not an Oxford House in their area, or if the existing houses are full, they should consider starting one.

## Establishing A New Oxford House

The steps generally necessary to get ready to get a new Oxford House started are:

1. Contact Oxford House, Inc. (1-301-587-2916) to ask for help and obtain detailed information about "How Oxford House Works."
2. Contact other recovering individuals in the area who are interested in starting an Oxford House.
3. File an application with Oxford House, Inc. for an Oxford House Charter.

### Step 1. Getting Information

In addition to reading this technical assistance paper, you may want to find out more about how an Oxford House works. Oxford House World Services, the non-profit, tax-exempt corporation that acts as an umbrella service organization for all Oxford Houses, can provide you with additional information and encouragement based upon its 29-year experience. You may contact:

Oxford House World Services  
1010 Wayne Avenue, Suite 300  
Silver Spring, Maryland 20910  
Telephone (301) 587-2916  
Facsimile (301) 589-0302  
  
Internet: [www.oxfordhouse.org](http://www.oxfordhouse.org)

Many states and other public and private organizations have contracts with Oxford House World Services to provide on-site technical assistance. Oxford House World Services can put you in touch with them. If your area does not have such a contract, Oxford House World Services can suggest ways to get one. Often local organizations provide money to get technical assistance from Oxford House World Services to assure proper establishment of a new Oxford House.

### Step 2. Getting Members

The original Oxford House got started because several recovering individuals decided to work together to start it. After the first house had been going a few months, three members of the first house decided to start another. Those three members became "Charter Members" of the new house – that is, they asked the other members of the first house if they could receive

authorization to replicate the first house at another location. The members of the first house not only agreed that they could, but also lent them money to help get the second house started.

Step Two of starting a new house consists of finding at least two recovering individuals willing to live in the new house. Of course, it is better to find three, four, five, six or more recovering individuals who want to live together in an Oxford House from the start, but that is sometimes difficult to do. Oxford House, Inc. encourages charter applicants to get as many charter members as possible because the larger the number, the easier it is to assume that expenses of the new house can be met. Nevertheless, interested individuals should not be discouraged from contacting Oxford House, Inc. just because they have only a few prospects as charter members. Oxford House, Inc. will be able to suggest ways to find other prospective charter members in the particular locality. Among other principles of Oxford House is one that limits affiliation to single-sex houses accommodating *at least six* residents (the average number of residents in an Oxford House is between eight and nine).

### Step 3. Formally Applying For A Charter

Self-run, self-supported recovery houses can be started by anyone and may stand-alone or be formally affiliated with Oxford House. Oxford House affiliation is advantageous for a new house because of the mutual support that can come from such an existing organization.

Once a group that is interested in starting an Oxford House has been formed, it should file an application for a charter. An application for a charter can be obtained by calling Oxford House World Services office at 301-587-2916 or can be downloaded from the Internet at [www.oxfordhouse.org](http://www.oxfordhouse.org).

### Bottom-Up Democracy and Support

The advantage of becoming affiliated with the Oxford House Network of Recovery Houses is the ability to share the experience of other self-run, self-supported recovery houses. Most Oxford Houses make monthly contributions of \$50 to help pay the expenses of Oxford House World Services.<sup>1</sup> The monthly contribution per

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<sup>1</sup> At the first annual Oxford House World Convention in 1999 the individual houses established a goal for each house to make a \$50 a month voluntary contribution to support the World Services Office and many do. These voluntary contributions combined with grants,

house amounts to about \$5 a resident and is payable out of house funds rather than as an individual assessment.

Individual Oxford Houses work together at a local level by forming Chapters. Within the Chapter framework most houses pay a small amount of monthly dues to defer expenses.<sup>2</sup>

Since 1997, the World Council has governed the policies and programs of the organization. The individual Oxford Houses elect the World Council.<sup>3</sup> The Oxford House, Inc. board of directors is made up of outside directors with representation of the World Council. It determines the overall business practices of the organization.

There is **no charge** for the Charter, but each house must maintain its operation consistent with the following conditions:

- A new Oxford House must be run in accordance with the concept, system of operations and traditions of Oxford House as set forth in the *Oxford House Manual*<sup>®</sup>.
- A resident member of a house must immediately leave if such member returns to using alcohol or drugs or fails to keep up with his or her share of the costs for operating the house, and
- A new Oxford House must be a good neighbor in the community and pay its bills in a timely manner.
- Groups of Oxford Houses in a locality form chapters to follow mutually supportive principles set forth in the *Oxford House Chapter Manual*<sup>®</sup>.

The charter becomes a valuable asset for providing support when a house is faced with the problem of having to expel a resident because of a return to drinking alcohol or using drugs. Expulsion of a member who has relapsed is always difficult but it becomes easier when members balance the decision to

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contracts and other contributions provide financial support for the national World Services Office to assure development of a strong network of individual Oxford Houses.

<sup>2</sup> In 4235, the average chapter dues were \$32.50 per resident per month. Chapter dues are used to keep individual houses in the chapter informed of meetings, events and programs fostered by the local cluster of Oxford Houses.

<sup>3</sup> In 1997 Oxford House, Inc. reorganized in order to have some outside directors to enable a faster expansion of the number of Oxford Houses. However, the reorganization kept the elected national group [the World Council] to make certain that the traditions and charter conditions of Oxford House are maintained. At an annual convention individual houses elect members of the 12-member World Council for staggered 3 - year terms of office.

expel against the risk of losing the house charter if they fail to maintain an alcohol and drug free environment.

Another value of the Charter is that a new Oxford House becomes part of Oxford House, Inc., a non-profit corporation that has been recognized as qualifying under section 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code as a tax-exempt organization.<sup>4</sup> This status permits individuals who make donations to claim a tax deduction.<sup>5</sup>



## Finding the Right House

As a general rule Oxford Houses are located in good areas of a community and not in slums. Recovering individuals have enough to do in staying sober and straight. There is no need to add fear of safety or poor living conditions to their effort<sup>6</sup>. Experience has shown that by living in a good house in a good neighborhood, all individuals, whether from poor, middle class or wealthy neighborhoods, value their living accommodations and have an additional incentive to stay clean and sober.

From a zoning standpoint, Oxford House has always maintained that its members should be treated the same as any residential family. In at least one locality the city council has passed a resolution finding Oxford House to be a residential family classification for

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<sup>4</sup> Any non-profit corporation can apply for tax-exempt status but it must (1) incorporate as a non-profit corporation, and (2) demonstrate that it is in fact non-profit. It takes up to two years to get recognition as qualifying under Section 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code. The same result can be obtained by affiliating with Oxford House, Inc.,

<sup>5</sup> The Internal Revenue Service often checks deductions claimed by taxpayers against the records of the recipient of the claimed donation. Therefore it is important that the tax-exempt organization keep accurate records so that the contributor does not get in trouble with the IRS. Oxford House, Inc. is a tax-exempt organization recognized as qualifying under Section 501(c)(3) of the Federal Internal Revenue Code. It will act as a central "record keeper" for individual Oxford Houses. It makes sense for new houses to get a charter from Oxford House, Inc. in order to become eligible to receive contributions, but the houses must follow the reporting rules of Oxford House, Inc. in order to assure proper record keeping. [Read the Oxford House pamphlet "contributions."]

<sup>6</sup> While all Oxford Houses are presently in good neighborhoods, Oxford House, Inc. has occasionally considered some good houses in not very good neighborhoods. Those houses were rejected primarily because individuals recovering from addiction to drugs pointed out the existence of drug trafficking in the area. Unlike liquor stores, which do not push their product door to door, drug dealers are less passive.

zoning purposes<sup>7</sup>. In every situation members living in an Oxford House have proved themselves to be good neighbors and zoning ordinances have not been a barrier. Moreover, the Fair Housing Act Amendments of 1988 (effective March 1, 1989) make it unlawful to discriminate against disabled persons such as those living together in self-run, self-supported recovery houses.<sup>8</sup>

The size of a house to be rented is significant. Experience has shown that at least four good-sized bedrooms are necessary. Experience has also shown that at least several of the bedrooms should be suitable for two people. Isolation and loneliness are threats to sobriety – particularly for the newly recovering. From an economic standpoint, expenses are best managed when the house is fully utilized. The goal should be to use a house as a large family would but to avoid overcrowding.

Experience has also shown that the only threat of an Oxford House being less than a good neighbor is the automobile. Members living in an Oxford House need to be careful not to use all the parking spaces in a neighborhood and not to park their cars in a way that makes their house look like a used car lot. In seeking a house to rent as a new Oxford House, keep in mind that once recovering individuals have been sober, they begin to get their finances straightened out and will often acquire a car. Can it be parked in a place that does not offend the neighbors?

Oxford House, Inc. can provide good information about the type of house to rent. However, the following rules of thumb are helpful to keep in mind:

- utilities and other costs usually run about fifty percent of monthly rent, therefore per member monthly payment will

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<sup>7</sup> The Chief of the Bureau of Inspections for the City of Bethlehem, Pennsylvania on September 11, 1987 made the following finding: "After reviewing your letter and review of the 'Oxford House' literature, regarding recovering alcoholics living together in a self-supported dwelling, I have concluded the proposal is within the definition of a 'family': as defined in the City of Bethlehem, Pa. Zoning Code."

<sup>8</sup> The United Supreme Court on May 15, 1995 issued a decision in *City of Edmonds, WA v. Oxford House, Inc.* [514 U.S. 725] which confirms that recovering alcoholics and drug addicts in an Oxford House are "handicapped" within the meaning of the Federal Fair Housing Act, as amended, and local jurisdictions must make a reasonable accommodation in local zoning laws to avoid discrimination under the Act. Likewise, casualty insurance companies must offer the same homeowner's policy to landlords renting to an Oxford House group as to an ordinary family. *Wai and Oxford House, Inc. v. Allstate Insurance Company, et. al.* [75 F. Supp. 2d 1 (DDC 1999)].

be the number of members in a house divided into 150 per cent of the rent<sup>9</sup>;

- the amount of weekly rent a member can afford depends upon the locality, but as a general rule members can afford between \$95 and \$155 a week to cover rent and other expenses;
- some vacant beds are to be expected during the first three to four months of operation (individual costs are higher when there are fewer members living in a house) because a new house takes time to become known (this can be overcome by lining up a greater number of charter members willing to move in on Day One) and some individuals will be kicked out because they relapse, thereby causing a vacancy until a new member is voted in. Keeping a member's rent paid in advance minimizes the economic impact of this event; and
- new houses are generally able to get donated furnishings.

Experience has shown that individual members of AA or NA are very helpful to newly recovering individuals who want to start an Oxford House. Newly recovering individuals should ask older recovering members for help in finding a house to rent and getting a charter from Oxford House, Inc. approved. Some older recovering individuals may even own rental property they are willing to rent to a new Oxford House. Generally, every Oxford House has paid rent on time and, if a house is adequate, the residents will continue to rent it year after year.

Rehabilitation facilities, local government alcohol and drug rehabilitation programs, and local halfway houses have also proven useful as sources of help for new houses. Generally, local halfway houses have a time limit for residents and welcome the opportunity to have an Oxford House in their locality to provide further transitional housing for recovering individuals. Any doubts they have about how Oxford House works can be alleviated through contact with a member of the Oxford House Staff. From a landlord's standpoint, Oxford House residents make good tenants. The groups tend to live in a house year after year, whereas the normal renter may move every few years. This fact alone is of great value to a landlord who avoids missing any monthly rental income and does not have to refurbish the property continually to attract a new tenant.

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<sup>9</sup> This rule of thumb applies except in regions where the rent for a four to six bedroom house is very high (above \$2,500 per month) or low (less than \$600 or \$700 a month). In high rent cases the "150% rule of thumb" will overstate the amount of cost per person and in low rent cases it will understate the cost per person. Oxford House can provide worksheets to compute actual costs. Such actual computation is always better to use than the "rule of thumb."

The physical qualities of a house should include the following:

**good location** - location of the house is very important since a poor location can result in drug pushers and crime; a good location can provide incentive to stay clean and sober;

**adequate size** - size of the house is important because enough space is needed to comfortably accommodate a large "family" of recovering individuals;

**adequate facilities** - facilities of the house should be adequate to accommodate the individuals living in it including one bath or shower for every four residents, a dishwasher to assure good health and at least one common room suitable for family like gatherings to discuss the new lifestyle free of alcohol and drug use; and

**proximity to public transportation** - in urban areas, proximity to public transportation is important because many individuals in early recovery from addiction to alcohol or drugs will not have an automobile.

Starting a new Oxford House takes some work, but help is available and the rewards are considerable – for many, the rewards are life saving.

Rehabilitation facilities are often willing to help a new house since Oxford House has been of great value to many rehabilitation facilities in their efforts to provide aftercare, which increases the chances of recovery. Alcohol and drug treatment programs run by local governments are usually very interested in the Oxford House concept because of its low cost and relapse prevention potential. Potential landlords with an interest in alcohol or drug abuse rehabilitation are often willing to help. Good business and doing good can go hand in hand. And, of course, individual members of AA and NA can usually be relied upon for support.



### Moving In

Newly-weds in America will generally "set up housekeeping" on their own. They usually do so with very few furnishings – a bed, some linens, dishes, and few pots and pans for cooking. So, too, with the residents of a new Oxford House.

The new group that has found a house and applied for its charter cannot simply wait to get all the furnishings needed. The rent for the house must be paid; the

recovering individuals need a place to live. It is often necessary, therefore, to move in with a minimum of furnishings.

The first item to obtain is beds. Frequently, potential residents of the house have a bed to donate. Retailers of beds often have mismatched twin bed sets that they will donate to Oxford House – which is a 501(c)(3) tax-exempt organization. If they will not donate the beds, they may be willing to sell the mismatched beds at a substantial discount.

Twin-sized beds are best and, whenever possible, it is advisable to have two people to a bedroom in an Oxford House in order to guard against isolation, loneliness and depression which can be a threat to sobriety while an individual is in early recovery.

Once beds are in the new house individuals can move in – the other necessary household furnishings can be obtained after individuals are living in the house and paying rent. Suggestions for getting the other items are listed in random order below:

- **Dishes, pots and pans** and other kitchen utensils are most often obtained by simply letting members at an AA or NA meeting know that the new house needs these items – if that does not produce results, try "Good Will" or a thrift or second-hand shop.

- **Tables and chairs** for the kitchen and dining room are also most often obtained by letting those in AA or NA know that the new house needs tables and chairs – others who can be asked for donations include church groups, veteran's groups, and service clubs such as the Lions, Rotary, Elks or Moose.

- **Chests of Drawers** and small tables for the bedroom are sometimes hard to get because families have a tendency to keep chests around for extra drawer space even when they are replaced. However, if you let people know you need them, you may be surprised. Again thrift shops, household content sales and yard sales may be a source for reasonably priced chests and tables. The local furniture store may have seconds, or discontinued or damaged merchandise. A house with an Oxford House Charter will be recognized as part of a 501 (c)(3) charitable organization, so that businesses and individuals can claim a tax deduction for the value of whatever is donated.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Material sent when a house receives an Oxford House Charter includes a booklet; "Reporting Donations for Tax Purposes," which explains the record keeping that must be done to permit individuals or

- Because the new Oxford House will be a family to a number of individuals who will prepare their own main meal, extra **refrigerator** space will probably be needed. The local appliance dealer will have some good second-hand refrigerators. As a rule of thumb, each member of the house should be able to use two refrigerator shelves.
- A **microwave** oven will help reduce the time that individuals need in the kitchen, but a house generally waits until a house is going a few months before it accumulates the money to buy one.
- A **clothes washer** and **dryer** are often standard equipment in a rental property.
- A **vacuum cleaner** and **rugs** are items that a new house usually seeks. They may not be essential, but both go a long way toward making a house a pleasant place to live in.

Although it may seem difficult to furnish a whole house, the members of an Oxford House will find that slowly but surely a house gets comfortably furnished.



## Organizing The House

Oxford House is a **concept** and a **system of operation**. The two go hand-in-hand. The concept is that recovering individuals can live together and democratically run an alcohol and drug-free living environment which supports the recovery of every resident. The system of operation is the nuts and bolts or how to make a self-run, self-supported recovery house work.

The Oxford House System of Operation has worked well " for "" hqt v " years " and " has " evolved "" into practices and procedures that work well for establishing a new Oxford House and keeping it on track once it has been established. Because recovering alcoholics and recovering drug addicts developed it, it takes into account the way responsibility is learned or relearned by those afflicted with alcoholism or drug addiction.

At the heart of the system of operations is fairness assured by democratic procedures and elected officials from within the Oxford House resident community. Each House officer is democratically elected for a term not to exceed six months in the same office. The

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business to claim a tax deduction. Such information can also be obtained from the local office of the United States Internal Revenue Service.

limited term of office for any particular office minimizes the chance that an individual prone to bossism will dominate an individual self-run, self-supported recovery house. Democracy, however, lies at the heart of the Oxford House system of operations – both for practical and therapeutic reasons.

As products of the democratic traditions of the United States, all members of an Oxford House can readily understand the utilitarian aspects of deciding issues by a majority vote. From the New England town meeting to the Congress of the United States, the practicality of resolving disagreements through the freely cast vote is understood. In an Oxford House the vote can resolve the color of a rug to be purchased, the assignment of clean-up chores, and the expulsion of a member who has relapsed.

Perhaps less clearly understood are the reasons that a democratically self-run recovery house provides special help to recovering individuals undertaking the task of developing a new lifestyle – often after years of practicing a lifestyle dominated by addiction to alcohol and drugs. Because Oxford House works to help individuals undergo that change in lifestyle, it is worth the time to consider the role that democratic rule by peers – and only peers – plays in the process. There is no better place to turn for a thorough understanding than the political commentaries about the system of government adopted for and tested by the more than two hundred years of history of the United States.

A starting point is an observation written in the 50th *Federalist* paper used to convince the Nation's forefathers that they should adopt the Constitution. "If men were angels," said the 50th *Federalist*, "no government would be necessary." As recovering individuals, each member of an Oxford House knows that men and women are not "angels". By the same token, involvement in Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous convinces one that all men and women are neither depraved nor immoral. Author Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr. summarized the value of democracy in achieving the balance between perfection and depravity in the following ways:

Democracy, properly construed, assumes neither total perfectibility nor total depravity. It sees humans simultaneously as tainted by original sin and as capable of redemption.

It is this "capability of redemption" that permits recovering individuals to live together in an alcohol and drug-free environment and work together to preserve that environment, accept responsibility and learn a new individual lifestyle free of alcohol and drug use. Always on guard against reverting to old behavior

patterns, each individual works as part of the group to learn values such as tolerance, caring and responsibility without having anyone to blame or fault for conditions as they exist. All the recovering individuals in a house are in the same boat; their common enemy is addiction to alcohol and drugs; their common goal a new lifestyle comfortably rid of both alcohol and drugs.

Just as the Constitution provides a framework for democracy to work in the United States and the Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions provide a framework for Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous to work, so too do the Oxford House System of Operations and Oxford House Traditions provide a framework for the self-run, self-supported recovery house to work. Some rules of procedure are necessary for democracy to work and these include the election of officers, the management of finances, acceptance of new residents, and removal of those who return to the use of alcohol or drugs.

Officers elected in an Oxford House are but "trusted servants" and their power is limited by the will of the majority and the Oxford House Traditions. The term of office in any one office is for a continuous period no more than six months. (An individual can be elected to the same office again after an intervening term of six months has elapsed. This is often necessary in smaller houses having very little turnover.)

The number of officers in an Oxford House depends – in part – upon the particular house. Every Oxford House elects the following officers:

- President
- Treasurer
- Comptroller
- Secretary
- Coordinator

Each of the above officers has a specific role to play in making the Oxford House System of Operations work.

The **President** presides at the weekly business meeting of the house. In that role he or she brings up items of business in a regular order, recognizes all the members wishing to comment on any issues, and conducts votes to determine the decision of the membership, when appropriate. Usually the President of an Oxford House will be one of two individuals whose signature

will be required on each check written by the House. (The other signature required is generally that of the Treasurer.)<sup>11</sup> Finally, each of the house presidents exercises leadership by resolving disputes among house members, listens to individual members who have problems, and represents the entire house in monthly Chapter meetings where several Oxford Houses in a geographic area work with each other to assure the good name and high quality of all Oxford Houses.

The **Treasurer** has primary responsibility for maintaining the finances of an Oxford House in good order. The Treasurer keeps the checking account in balance, writes checks for timely payment of house bills, collects the rent and lets the members know the financial status of the house at every weekly business meeting. Most houses post the Treasurer's Weekly Report in a prominent place in the house so that each member can examine it at his or her leisure. There are no secrets when it comes to house finances.

The **Secretary** records minutes of each house business meeting. Those minutes are read at the next business meeting so that the group will be able to focus on unfinished business and continually keep track of house problems, policies and decisions. The Secretary also keeps track of applications for membership in the house, arranges interviews for applicants, and maintains a file of applicants accepted and rejected. After a house has been in existence a short period of time, the number of applications is likely to far exceed the number of spaces available.

The **Comptroller** is an assistant to the Treasurer and has primary responsibility for collecting weekly 'rent' from the members of the house on time. Every self-run, self-supported recovery house charges each member the same amount of weekly rent and the amount of rent is an equal share of the house expenses. Because there is no "fat" in the weekly share of expenses assessments, everybody must pay on time. Each week the entire house discusses what to do about any member's overdue share of expenses. In general, most houses try to collect the equal share of expenses at least one week in advance of when it is due.

The **Coordinator** is – in many ways – the most important office in the house. He or she must assign

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<sup>11</sup> Proper management of finances is very important in a self-run, self-supported recovery house. Two signatures are always required to write any checks. The money belongs to all the members of the house as a group and great care has to be taken to make certain it is expended only for expenditures authorized by the group.

and review weekly chores that every resident in the house must undertake to keep the house neat and clean. Because the offices are held for only six months, everyone tends to cooperate because each person knows he or she may be elected Coordinator the next time around. Working together to keep a house clean is one of the ways house members learn responsibility and gain self-esteem.

Group decisions are made by majority vote, except with respect to admission of new members into the group. To admit a new member, an 80% favorable vote by existing members is needed. The purpose of the 80% vote is three-fold: (1) acceptance of a new member into the group involves a commitment by nearly everyone in the house and a newcomer should be assured a supportive environment when he or she moves in; (2) knowing that an 80% acceptance vote is needed, the newcomer will value his or her admission more than if admission were by a simple majority, and (3) an 80% admission vote forces thoughtful consideration by the entire house when a newcomer applies for admission.

The *Oxford House Manual*<sup>®</sup> provides guideposts for organization of an Oxford House. Within a matter of weeks the self-run, self-supported recovery house can be operating smoothly if organizational procedures are followed, including a business meeting in the house at least once a week. (There are no AA or NA meetings held in an Oxford House, but the members of a house tend to go to an average of five or six AA or NA meetings outside the house each week.)

The importance of the weekly business meeting cannot be overstated. It not only serves to keep the members of a house up-to-date concerning the financial matters of the house but also serves as a place to resolve personality differences between house members. It also provides a forum in which peer pressure can be used to encourage each member to work his or her own 12-step program of recovery. In brief, the house meeting becomes an important opportunity for members to help each other keep on a steady course to develop a new comfortable lifestyle that is free of alcohol and drug use.

The most difficult – and most important decision – a self-run, self-supported recovery house has to make is whether or not a resident has returned to using alcohol or drugs. The decision is made at a meeting of the house residents. The members consider the facts – all of who know about addiction from their own experiences – and a vote is taken on whether or not a relapse has occurred. If a majority of the members vote

that the resident has relapsed, he or she must leave immediately.

Since recovering addicts are highly vulnerable to relapse, it is likely that many houses will have some members who relapse. Each member, however, realizes that the system works only if the relapser is expelled. The common welfare of the group in maintaining an alcohol and drug-free living environment is too great to risk by not expelling any individual at the first sign of a relapse. Moreover, each member knows that failure to expel a member who has used drugs or alcohol places the charter of their house at risk. Oxford House, Inc. makes it clear that a charter can be revoked if members who return to using are not expelled.

Once a member has been expelled, he or she is normally not accepted back into the same Oxford House. However, the member may be accepted into another Oxford House following a period of thirty days' sobriety.

The expulsion of relapsers has a positive effect on both the relapser and the other members of the house. As painful as an expulsion may be, it is a judgment by one's peers. The peers themselves who make the difficult decision seem to have their own sobriety reinforced.

The democratic nature of the house organization, the written system of operations, the election of officers, the written traditions and the grant of the charter all work together to promote recovery through the exercise of responsibility. As the members enjoy their recovery and realize the role that the self-run, self-supported recovery house has played in recovery, they help replicate the experience for others by starting another recovery house.

Individual houses organize themselves into groups [chapters] through which houses help each other to stay on track help assurance of quality operation by each house. In local areas the officers of each house meet at one of the member houses as a chapter each month. Chapters provide a forum for individual houses at the local level to share their strength, experience and hopes. In doing so they provide an effective means for keeping



## The Concept

The concept underlying self-run, self-supported recovery houses is the same as the one underlying Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous – addicted individuals can help themselves by helping each other abstain from alcohol and drug use one day at a time for a long enough time to permit a new set of values to be substituted for the values of a lifestyle in which alcohol and drugs were used.

Dr. George E. Vaillant, in his book *The Natural History of Alcoholism*, states the obvious goal in the treatment of alcoholism [or drug addiction] when he states that, "The treatment of alcoholism should be directed toward altering an ingrained habit of maladaptive use of alcohol. ..." He goes on to spell out the four components of treatment that can achieve that goal:

- (1) offering the patient a nonchemical substitute dependency for alcohol,
- (2) reminding him ritually that even one drink can lead to pain and relapse,
- (3) repairing the social and medical damage that he has experienced, and
- (4) restoring self-esteem.<sup>12</sup>

Vaillant also points out that providing all four components at once is not easy.

Disulfiram (Antabuse) and similar compounds that produce illness if alcohol is ingested are reminders not to drink, but they take away a cherished addiction without providing anything in return: they provide the second component but ignore the first. Prolonged hospitalization provides the first three components but ignores the fourth and eventually the first. Hospital patienthood destroys self-esteem, and when hospitalization ceases the patient loses his substitute dependency. Tranquilizing drugs provide the first component but ignore the other three. For example, providing the anxious alcoholic with tranquilizers will give temporary relief of anxiety but may also facilitate the chain of conditioned responses that lead to picking up a drink at the next point of crisis. Over the long term, providing alcoholics with

pills only reinforces their illusion that relief of distress is pharmacological, not human.<sup>13</sup>

Vaillant does note that "self-help groups, of which Alcoholics Anonymous is one model, offer the simplest way of providing the alcoholic with all four components referred to above."<sup>14</sup> So too with Oxford House. It provides the benefits of prolonged hospitalization without the destruction of self-esteem. In fact, self-esteem is restored through the exercise of responsibility, helping others, resocialization, and constructive pride in maintaining an alcohol and drug-free living environment without dependency upon any outside authority or helper.

The concept – which seems never before to have been formalized on a democratically, self-run, and self-supported basis – is not new.

The basic idea that one addict is a primary source of help for another has long been known and was, in fact, basic to the history of AA. Robert Thomsen, in his biography of Bill Wilson, one of the co-founders of AA, describes the first meeting between Bill and Dr. Bob Smith as follows:

They talked on for hours. Soon Dr. Bob had opened up and was speaking as frankly, as unashamedly, as Bill. When they parted after eleven o'clock, they knew something had radically changed in them both. Although they could not be specific about what it was, a spark that was to light future fires had been struck.

For Bill it had been a unique, wondrous and totally engrossing experience. After admitting his deep need to share his problems with another drunk, he had not felt the slightest desire to preach or in any way judge the other man. With a sense of incredible freedom, relief and, yes, joy, he'd felt the two of them growing closer, their talk becoming a mutual thing, and he knew they had both felt this. Two drunks had found a new, mysterious and loving kind of communication, a new language of the heart. The link he had been seeking was located that night in Henrietta's library.<sup>15</sup>

They had dinner together the next evening and after a few days Bill moved in with Anne and Dr. Bob in their

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<sup>13</sup> Id. 301.

<sup>14</sup> Id. 301.

<sup>15</sup> Henrietta Siberling of Akron, Ohio, who had been a member of an Oxford Group in Akron and responsible for getting Bill Wilson and Dr. Bob Smith together.

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<sup>12</sup> George E. Vaillant, *The Natural History of Alcoholism*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1983, p. 300.

home on Ardmore Avenue. He sent word to his proxy associates in New York that he'd be staying on in Akron, and, to his surprise, they wired some cash to him and suggested he might hire a lawyer and investigate the possibility of fraud at the stockholders meeting.<sup>16</sup> Thus he was no longer penniless, but his primary interest now was his work with Dr. Bob and the uncanny parallels they were discovering in their stories.

Both were Vermonters, Bob the son of a judge in St. Johnsbury. Both had taken up drinking at an early age, Bob while still a student at Dartmouth, even before medical school, and from the beginning they had both gone at booze heavily. Each, except for the hells created by drinking, had had a happy marriage and each admitted he must have been born with an iron constitution to withstand the beating he had given himself. And each had wrecked a career that had started out brilliantly.

These were the external parallels. The interior ones were equally striking, the guilt and remorse, the defenses they'd constructed, the passionate desires and the futile efforts to understand and be in control, and finally, after seeking so many other solutions, they had both wound up trying to give shape and meaning to their lives by adhering to the excruciatingly high standards of the Oxford Group.<sup>17</sup>

About ten days after Bill Wilson had moved in to live with Dr. Bob and Anne, Dr. Bob went to a medical meeting in Atlantic City and relapsed into drinking alcohol. Five days later, Dr. Bob returned to Akron drunk. His wife Anne and Bill Wilson sobered him up over a three-day period. Dr. Bob took his last drink on June 10, 1935. Bill Wilson stayed in Akron living in Dr. Bob's house on Ardmore Avenue for four months and in many ways it was the first Oxford House – two former drunks living in an alcohol and drug-free environment focused upon helping each other and others recover from addiction to alcohol.

Bill Wilson and Dr. Bob Smith went on to practice and refine the principles they learned in the first few months of living together in the alcohol and drug-free environment of the house on Ardmore Avenue in Akron. Their legacy to individuals now struggling to recover from alcoholism and drug addiction –AA– is present in every town throughout the United States and most of the world. It is that legacy that provides the underpinning for the self-run, self-supported recovery

house as an alcohol and drug-free, self-run and self-supported living environment.

The concept of a self-run, self-supported recovery house for individuals recovering from addiction is simple, but it requires individual initiative and acceptance by society for mass replication to become a reality. The sanction and the framework provided by the Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1988 and the Fair Housing Act Amendments of 1988 create a climate, which encourages replication. The experience and expertise of Oxford House can provide the motivation and technical know-how to help make mass replication of recovery houses a reality throughout the State.



### **State Recovery House Revolving Loan Programs**

The State Recovery House Loan Programs can serve as the catalyst needed to get individual recovery houses started throughout the State.<sup>18</sup> The first month's rent and security deposit is usually available to get a house started. This section of the paper explains how to effectively use this simple program to begin the process of affording all individuals recovering from addiction with the support they need to get the long-term support they need to use 12-step programs to develop a lifestyle permanently free of addiction to alcohol and drugs.

Some states have contracts or grant arrangements with Oxford House World Services. In those cases the process for finding a suitable house, recruiting recovering individuals to live in the house and to teach those individuals the right way to organize and operate an Oxford House is easier than where there is no Oxford House presence. In all states, Oxford House World Services is prepared to help anyone to learn how to start and operate Oxford Houses.

### **Technical Assistance**

The telephone number for getting assistance from Oxford House World Services is **1-301-587-2916**. Specific questions and general information about how to help make the State Recovery Housing Program a success should be directed to them. Oxford House has people who have experience starting and running self-

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<sup>16</sup> Bill Wilson had been in Akron to work on the acquisition of a company in which there was a stockholders proxy fight.

<sup>17</sup> Robert Thomsen, *Bill W.*, Harper & Row, New York 1975, pp 238-239.

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<sup>18</sup> 42 USC 300x-25 is the section of the U.S. Code that is the provision of law permitting states to use block grant money to establish a recovery home revolving loan fund. Some states have such funds; others do not. See our website: [www.oxfordhouse.org](http://www.oxfordhouse.org) for a discussion of start-up loans and contact information for each state alcohol and drug agency. Click "Links/State Gov".

run, self-supported recovery houses and will share that experience with citizens wanting to make the State program a success or to get a recovery home start-up revolving loan fund established. Oxford House World Services also has experienced individuals available to states though modest grants or contracts. The on-site outreach workers can provide the expertise to enable local recovering individuals to establish clusters or statewide networks of self-run, self-supported Oxford Houses to encourage treatment providers, drug courts and re-entry from prison programs to provide a realistic opportunity for recovering individuals to become comfortable enough in sobriety to avoid relapse. See DePaul University NIAAA and NIDA research results showing Oxford House is the best practice to assure recovery without relapse at the Oxford House website: [www.oxfordhouse.org](http://www.oxfordhouse.org).

### Loan Approval

Once a suitable house has been lined up Oxford House can help individuals apply for a start-up loan where states have contracted with Oxford House World Services to provide such assistance.<sup>19</sup> Start-up loans may be granted within the following guidelines:

- The maximum amount of the loan is \$4,000.
- Proceeds from the loan must be used for specific items, i.e. first month's rent, security deposit, beds and so on. (Oxford House will discuss with you the exact permissible uses of the loan.)
- The loan must be repaid within two years in twenty-four equal monthly installments. (It may be repaid sooner in order to put money back in the Revolving Fund so that other groups in the State can start more houses.)
- As a general rule four or more recovering individuals must apply for the loan (In some cases Oxford House, Inc. or participating state agencies will approve loans that meet all other conditions even though the number of loan applicants is less than four provided that once operational the house will provide room for at least six residents.)
- In all cases the number of recovering individuals living in a group must be six or more and preference will be given to groups of between six and fifteen. An Oxford House CHARTER can be given only to groups of SIX or more recovering individuals. Fewer residents are not able to effectively function within

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<sup>19</sup> Experience has shown that on-site technical assistance within a state works best to establish Oxford Houses and to develop mutually supportive chapters and state associations to assure quality control – e.g. to keep houses on track once they are established.

the discipline democratic system of operation. History has shown that the best number of residents in a group is eight to twelve.

- Oxford House will provide technical assistance for meeting all requirements. It will also be available to provide advice about renting the house, lining up recovering individuals to live in the house, opening the checking account for the new house, getting utilities on, and getting organized to operate democratically and on a self-support basis.

An appropriate loan application can be obtained by calling the State Alcohol and Drug Agency<sup>20</sup> or Oxford House National Headquarters at (301) 587-2916. Oxford House will send you a copy of the current application, or tell you where to get one.

Once a loan is approved it is made to the recovery house group – not particular individuals. Therefore, you must have a group ready to go when the loan is approved and establish a checking account in the group's name. The group will need a federal tax identification number. Oxford House can help you get one.

The group getting the loan will be given a coupon book with each coupon showing the amount due and the due date. The repayment must be made on time each month that a payment is due. Failure to make timely repayment will result in a penalty being assessed. There is no interest on the loan but each group should work hard to avoid penalties by making its payment on time. Returning money to the revolving loan fund becomes available to start more houses.

The loan application process is not difficult if the individuals wanting to start a recovery house contact Oxford House early in the process. Oxford House can help make the loan application process a simple one. Potential applicants should write or call Oxford House World Services Office for assistance. Businesses, foundations, local church groups, state or local governments should inquire about outreach and technical service by Oxford House World Services Office. On-site technical service can be provided to start new houses and to help keep existing houses on track. The cost per recovery bed is only a fraction of the cost of the traditional halfway house bed or incarceration – less than a dollar per day versus a cost of between \$53 to \$82 a day.

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<sup>20</sup> State agency telephone numbers are listed at website: [www.oxfordhouse.org](http://www.oxfordhouse.org) under "Links/State Gov".

## Getting a CHARTER

Write or telephone (301-587-2916) Oxford House World Services about how to get a CHARTER for the new house. A conditional CHARTER will generally be granted within thirty days. The "conditional" CHARTER usually sets a specific time period for the new group to obtain a house and get organized. If it does not obtain a house or get organized during the conditional period it becomes void, but the group can reapply for the CHARTER. If a new house does get properly organized within the conditional period it is granted a regular permanent CHARTER.

It is important to obtain a CHARTER because it permits the new group to enjoy all the advantages of being part of the Oxford House network of recovery houses. As part of that network the new group is able to receive assistance to make sure that the new house works. Moreover, the new house is able to share the strength, experience and support of all other Oxford Houses. Together recovering individuals and recovery houses help each other help themselves.

There is no cost involved in getting a CHARTER from Oxford House and it contains only three conditions:

- **The recovery house must be operated on a democratic basis;**
- **The recovery house must be financially self-supported; and**
- **Individuals who use alcohol and drugs must be expelled.**

Compliance with the CHARTER assures that the recovery house, in fact, provides support for individuals to recover from addiction and begin productive lives unhampered by the ravages of addiction to alcohol and drugs. Oxford House, Inc. requires that a house demonstrate its understanding and application of the disciplined democratic system of operations before it is awarded a permanent charter.

Recovery without relapse is the theme and goal of every Oxford House. Each house also accepts the responsibility of expanding and strengthening the network of Oxford Houses so that all recovering individuals can achieve recovery without relapse.

This responsibility for affording a universal opportunity to recovering individuals for recovery without relapse is an outgrowth of the 1999 Oxford House World

Convention. At that first convention Oxford Houses followed through on the Convention theme – “If Not Us, Who?.” They accepted successful expansion as part of their responsibility and voted to contribute \$50 a month per house to Oxford House World Services to improve both expansion and the ability of Oxford House, Inc. to provide technical services to help expand the national network of houses. In 2008 more than 250 Oxford Houses around the country voluntarily sent in \$50 a month to help expand Oxford Houses for others.

The money provided by individual houses to the central Oxford House operation enabled the organization to expand into new territories. While Oxford Houses are now located in most states throughout the country, there are many areas still needing their first group of Oxford Houses. Thanks to the dedication and generosity of existing Oxford House residents and alumni modest funding is provided to pay trained outreach workers to help others establish to establish Oxford Houses.



YOU can help your State establish as many self-run, self-supported Oxford recovery houses as are needed to provide an opportunity for every recovering individual who wants a supportive, alcohol and drug-free place to live... TAKE ACTION TODAY!



*Oxford House, Inc. is the winner of the 2005 Harry V. McNeill Award for Effective Community Service American Psychological Association*

A review of our web site: [www.oxfordhouse.org](http://www.oxfordhouse.org) will provide additional information about Oxford House availability and how to start a new Oxford House.

# Oxford House™

## *Recovery • Responsibility • Replication*

The 3-R's for Addicts to Regain Freedom

***Recovery:*** The process by which addicted individuals become free of addiction for the rest of their life.

***Responsibility:*** The means by which an individual gradually assumes control over his or her lifestyle so that choices can be consistently made to avoid the use of alcohol or drugs.

***Replication:*** The means through which addicted individuals living in an Oxford House™ share their newfound lifestyle of living in a supportive, alcohol and drug-free environment with other individuals wanting comfortable sobriety by starting new Oxford Houses to give other recovering individuals a real opportunity to achieve recovery without relapse.

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# Oxford House™

1975-2017

*40 Years of Organized Self-Help To Enable Alcoholics and Drug Addicts to Recover Without Relapse*

- ◆ Providing Sole Authority for Oxford House Charters
- ◆ Providing Technical Assistance to Establish New Oxford Houses
- ◆ Providing Technical Assistance to Keep Existing Oxford Houses on Track
- ◆ Providing Organization of Chapters to Help Houses Help Themselves
- ◆ Providing the Time, Living Environment and Support to Enable Alcoholics and Drug Addicts to Recovery Without Relapse
- ◆ Providing the Legal, Philosophical, and Scientific Framework for a Cost-effective, Worldwide Network of Supportive Recovery Housing.

Winner of the American Psychological Foundation's 2005 Harry V. McNeil Memorial Award  
*"Oxford House stands as a true socially conscious model for community development and action."*

Write or Call

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