

# **Landlords**

## **The Legal and Policy Reasons Underlying Oxford House Group Leases**

In 1988, Congress established the requirements that every state in the country establish a revolving fund to help start houses based on the Oxford House model (P.L. 100-690). Since that time, Oxford House, Inc., has organized a national headquarters to help individuals throughout the United States open Oxford Houses. The purpose of this paper is to assist new groups, landlords, rental agents and local officials understand how Oxford House leases residential single-family houses in good neighborhoods.

In 1975, Oxford House leases were pathfinders in the landlord-tenant arena. Today, they have become the norm for the thirty-nine states and two hundred-nineteen cities in which Oxford House operates. The leases are exactly the same as a lease to a single family but with certain important distinctions.

## **Who Signs the Lease**

The signatory of the lease is the individual Oxford House; for example, Oxford House - Main Street. The effect of this commitment by the group to the landlord is important because of the nature of Oxford House and the application of local landlord-tenant laws.

Oxford House works because an individual resident who returns to using alcohol or drugs – in or outside of the house – must be immediately expelled from the house. If the individual is a signatory to the lease the immediate eviction becomes difficult, if not impossible, because of local landlord-tenant rights. In many jurisdictions it takes up to ninety days to evict a tenant even for non-payment of rent. Since no individual is a signatory to an Oxford House lease, the relapsing individual who is being evicted has no legal rights to delay his or her departure. There is no way to accomplish this result without the signature on the lease being in the name of the particular Oxford House group.

The landlord gets additional benefit from this type of agreement. The landlord deals with duly constituted officers of the group and can expect accountability for all matters concerning the occupancy. Individuals come and go, but officers will always be duly authorized to act for the group. Moreover, the landlord does not have to worry about the accountability of particular individuals. He or she is dealing with an established organization that, of necessity, takes pride in preservation of its good name and reputation.

## **Who is Responsible**

The particular group house is responsible to the landlord. An important part of why Oxford House has been so successful is that accountability and responsibility is placed on the recovering individuals themselves. As a group they behave responsibly and out of the "group responsibility" individuals develop a new responsible lifestyle free of alcohol and drug use.

Oxford House, Inc., plays an important part in making certain that individual groups behave responsibly through the use of the "Charter" mechanism. Each individual group is given an Oxford House Charter which makes it a part of the network of Oxford House recovery houses. That charter carries with it certain privileges; for example, the individual house is (1) brought under the tax exempt status of Oxford House, Inc. (2) given support and education about the operation of self-run, self-supported recovery houses, (3) provided assistance in filling vacancies and enforcing sobriety and financial responsibility and (4) monitored to assure quality control. It becomes important to every house that it keep its charter.

Oxford House, Inc., monitors the activities of each house in a number of ways. It has on-site support by dedicated members of Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous. Individuals active in those programs have the Oxford House toll-free telephone number and call Oxford House headquarters if a particular house is not strictly carrying out its responsibilities under its charter. Getting sober and staying sober is serious business for these recovering individuals and their dedication to helping others achieve sobriety is unsurpassed.

Oxford House, Inc., keeps in touch with the members of each house on a regular basis. This involves weekly reports, periodic phone calls and the maintenance of continuous contact to keep track of vacancies and assure financial responsibility. It also enforces the Oxford House system of operations.

Oxford House, Inc., does not guarantee payments of rent. That would defeat the whole principle of establishing a system that teaches recovering individuals themselves to be responsible. However, it does the next best thing by utilizing and enforcing its charter concept. Unlike the normal group house situation, for which there is no assurance of quality control, the Oxford House concept provides the landlord with the assurance of a dedicated partner in making certain that every Oxford House in the country is run in a responsible manner.

## **Zoning**

Oxford Houses are considered single-family residences for purposes of zoning. This has always been true in practice and since March 12, 1989, the effective date of the 1988 Amendments to the Federal Fair Housing Act, it has been a matter of law. Those amendments make it unlawful for any jurisdiction to discriminate against congregate living for the disabled. Recovering alcoholics and drug addicts are within the scope of the term "disabled". Therefore, Oxford Houses are not subject to zoning laws regulating the number of unrelated individuals who may live in a single family dwelling. An Oxford House is not a treatment facility. It is simply an alcohol and drug free living environment which provides an opportunity for recovering individuals to live as a family unit focused on the need to change their individual lifestyles to ones absolutely free of alcohol and drug use.

Oxford House, Inc., will legally defend any claim of zoning violation made by localities still unfamiliar with the Federal Fair Housing Act.

## Info for Neighbors

Oxford House is a thirty-six year old concept and system of operation for recovering alcoholics and drug addicts to have a realistic opportunity to get comfortable enough in sobriety to stay clean and sober forever. Houses are always rented. Oxford House owns no property because our interest is recovery not money or wealth. We also want to avoid any temptation to fight over money or property.

By renting good houses in good neighborhoods, we have demonstrated that we can be good neighbors all over the country. As you can see on our website, well over a thousand houses provide homes for about 10,000 recovering individuals at any one time – and we have been proving it for over thirty years. Since 1975, neighbors have found that Oxford House residents are in fact good neighbors. In 2006, the *Journal of Prevention & Intervention in the Community* (The Hayworth Press) Vol. 31, No. 1/2, 2006, pp 41-49 published an article, *This Is My Neighborhood: Comparing United States and Australian Oxford House Neighborhoods* which found – independent of Oxford House itself – that neighbors found Oxford House residents made “good neighbors.” Quoting Jason, Roberts and Olson (2004) the authors found that “neighbors living in immediate proximity of a U.S. Oxford House considered the residents more positively than persons living several blocks away; moreover, property values on the block where the Oxford Houses were located did not decrease once the setting was established.” In fact, everywhere Oxford House has located, property values increased – contrary to some of the unfounded fears that a few individuals sometimes fan when they learn an Oxford House is coming to town.

Ever since the first Oxford House started in Silver Spring, Maryland in 1975, the men and women in Oxford House have made all that they do – or fail to do – open to the public. As a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization, Oxford House World Services keeps its finances, actions and locations open to the public because we want the public and neighbors to know what we do and why we do it. Feel free to stop by and visit the men or women living in an Oxford House.

All our materials are included at our web site and neighbors can understand how Oxford House works by downloading and reading any of the material. This is important for two reasons: [1] we want neighbors to know us, and [2] neighbors want to know us because they usually know someone or have a relative that has been an active alcoholic or drug addict. Oxford House becomes good news because the Oxford House self-run, self-supported, disciplined concept and system of operations replaces hopelessness with hope and failure with success. Moreover, the Oxford House concept of self-support saves taxpayers a lot of money and it produces successful recovery without relapse for four to five times as many individuals as any other recovery method afforded alcoholics and/or drug addicts. For more information, please visit our website at [www.oxfordhouse.org](http://www.oxfordhouse.org) and feel free to contact us if you have any questions. We will get back to you quickly. We have been and will continue to be good neighbors.