

Julian Housing Link Workers

Julian Housing Support Trust Ltd, a Norfolk based voluntary sector organisation providing community housing support for people experiencing mental health difficulties, has established an innovative service for people who are in-patients on the acute wards. It was piloted in Great Yarmouth in 2000, initially set up with funding from Crisis. The service now covers the Homelessness Directorate, with matched funding from PCT's.

At least one, and sometimes two, Julian Housing Link workers are attached to each psychiatric acute ward in Norfolk. The service was developed because we recognised that often people are admitted to hospital because their housing difficulties are impacting on their mental health. Problems can seem insurmountable. Often a timely intervention could stop matters deteriorating, thus preventing a lengthy admission. The link Workers make contact with clients as early on in the admission as possible. The reasons for a referral to the Housing Link Workers have been:

Homelessness

In the process of being evicted

Being evicted from a 'Care' situation

Want to move from current accommodation

Relationship breakdown or bereavement impacting on housing

Currently living with family, but wants to live independently

Does not want to return to existing accommodation or residential care

Benefit and debt difficulties impacting on housing stability

Problems in managing current tenancy

Other housing related issues, such as problems with utilities, repairs and furniture

The workers will meet with a client on the ward, and together they will undertake a strengths based housing assessment, then make a plan together which is then shared with the wider care team. Wherever possible the client is given the necessary information and advice to help them resolve their difficulties themselves. As times, people will need much more support to resolve their difficulties. Link Workers can help the client make contact with housing providers, accompanying them to interviews, and helping them through the application process. Link Workers can work with people for up to four weeks after discharge on matters to do with their housing support needs. A total of 85 people were assisted by the service in the last three months. Patients find the service helpful, reducing their anxieties about their housing situation at a time when they are feeling particularly vulnerable, If the Link Workers feel that clients need support for longer than four weeks, they can be referred to the Julian Housing Community Teams, who provide longer-term support.

Link Workers work closely with all the housing providers in the area, to try and ensure that reasonable housing options are available to clients. These connections are extremely important and valuable, and have been an important route to more suitable interim accommodation than bed and breakfast for homeless clients.

Recently, commissioners of the service wished to know if the service had an impact on 'bed blocking' and length of stay in hospital. Questionnaires were distributed to all practitioners on the Acute Wards. Returns indicated that the service was valued for many reasons by ward staff. Reasons for this included:

The expertise, accessibility and friendly attitude of workers:

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Their proactive approach

It allowed nursing staff to focus on health issues

Provides a good link between the ward and the community

They can give advice to staff in complex situations

They can accompany patients to housing interviews, and to view resources

They help patients to complete housing and benefit forms

It prompts acute ward staff to assess social and housing issues

Respondents said that the interventions of the Housing Link Worker had led to shorter hospital stays, and more rapid discharges. Professionals have said of the service:

“Problems are being addressed earlier and not left until just before discharge. It provides a vital link between agencies. Service users are more comfortable working with someone from the voluntary sector.”

“The Link Worker on my ward is totally accepting of my patients in the acute stages of their illness, she works with that and takes it into account. She is also realistic about what the client wants and what housing options are available.”

A service user said:

“Relating to Julian Housing was like relating to friends. They didn’t judge me and they didn’t put up with any nonsense from me. They just helped.”

We believe that this is an innovative service that has improved the housing situation of patients on the acute wards. Patients will often talk at length with the Housing Link Workers about their difficulties because they perceive them to be outside the medical process. Effective, collaborative working has been established with colleagues in the statutory and housing sectors, for the benefit of all concerned.

If you would like further information about the role of the Housing Link Worker, please contact Anne McCrudden (Director of Outreach Services), Julian Housing Support, 1A Oak Street, Norwich NR3 3AE. Tel 01603 767718 email a.mccrudden@julianhousing.org