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Abstract:

Oliver is a young man with autism who has challenging behaviours and who spent many years in an institution. Upon rejection from a group home, his parents and some staff members worked on providing him with a service that was tailored to his needs. Today Oliver lives in his own home and is in part-time employment in a job he enjoys. Given the right environment and thoughtful planning, the triggers to his outbursts have been minimised and he has become a valued member of his community. The article outlines the keys to unlocking positive change for Oliver, contrasting these with some of the human and financial costs of failing to respond to an individual's needs.

Keywords: Accommodation, Individualisation

Oliver's story

Team work, resources and innovation turn a life around

By Community Visitor, Margaret Howard

Communication problems

Oliver is in his mid-twenties and has autism. He finds it difficult to relate to people and his frustration with these communication problems has at times led to violent outbursts.

He lived at a large government institution between the ages of 7 and 16. After an assessment, Oliver's parents were told that he was 'uncontrollable', and that the best thing would be for him to stay at the institution.

Nevertheless, his parents asked for a trial placement in a group home closer to them. Oliver and four other residents moved into a government – run house with people they did not know and with staff who were strangers. There was little preparation for an unfamiliar environment.

Violent outbursts

Gradually the other residents became familiar and comfortable in the new home. However, Oliver expressed his anxiety by lashing out at the other residents and staff, and by banging his head and biting his hand. Some staff received injuries, refusing to work at the house, while other residents lived in fear, unable to enjoy their new home. Many household items were also destroyed in these outbursts.

Finding the right living situation

Oliver's mother feared that her son's trial in the group home was 'a dismal failure' and that the group home model was exactly the wrong kind of model for someone like Oliver.

Oliver lived in a kind of hell for six years, before leaving the house following protests from staff and other parents. Most people thought that Oliver should return to the institution; however Oliver's parents and some staff believed that he should be given another chance with a service designed around his needs.

As an interim measure, Oliver lived in the basement of another group home. Whilst this was not an ideal situation, his parents and staff worked to develop the structure and consistency that could not be sustained in the previous house. Staff also noticed that his behaviour settled down in the calmer environment without other residents. Oliver then moved to a flat on his own with staff support and his life began to steadily improve.

Getting to know Oliver

When I first visited, staff cautioned me that Oliver was sometimes uneasy about people coming to his home, so I arranged to meet him at an ice cream parlour. He

read my name badge, said 'hello', but soon was ready to go. I was happy to fit in with Oliver's schedule and to avoid situations where he might feel threatened or intimidated. As he got to know me, Oliver would occasionally make me a cup of tea at his home.

Responsive staff

The area manager from the Department of Community Services acknowledged that the service appeared to be working for Oliver. The level of funding is regularly reviewed to ensure that the support matches Oliver's changing needs and to avoid stretching the resources too thinly.

Staff noticed that Oliver had an interest in sorting through newspapers and magazines. As he was fit and active, they thought he would enjoy being involved in a paper run. Oliver was very enthusiastic.

Oliver now delivers local newspapers and pamphlets in a large neighbourhood, giving him three to four days paid employment a week. He has two certificates on his wall from his employer in recognition that he is an excellent employee and is considered to be responsible, dependable and reliable. Some customers wait for Oliver to say hello and tell him he is doing a good job and he started to say a brief hello and wave as he passes their gates. Oliver even pays tax on his earnings!

A home of his own

Oliver was offered a one bedroom unit from the Department of Housing but he rejected it as it was too small to store and assemble the large bundles of newspapers and pamphlets for his work. He then accepted the offer of a two bedroom house and his family and staff helped him furnish the house as he chose. Oliver has a good relationship with his neighbours.

Oliver now uses a daily program board, improving his reading and writing skills, to structure his day. He learned to read at three years old, but these skills were unused until his move to

Keys to a better life for Oliver

The keys to unlocking positive changes for Oliver included:

- staff and parents working as a team to design appropriate services;
- appropriate programming and resources to give staff effective strategies to manage challenging behaviour;
- a commitment by management to support innovative practices to meet the individual needs of people;
- stronger family advocates who believe that people should continue to have another chance;
- recognition that the *Disability Services Act 1993* protects residents rights by ensuring that decisions must take people's needs and wishes into accounts;
- careful planning with a long term vision;
- creative attitudes about the use of financial resources , staffing hours and employment options and;
- personal and professional dedication and commitment by staff to achieve positive outcomes for individuals.

The price we pay when individual needs aren't met

The costs can be measured in both financial and human terms. When we fail to respond to individual needs, the costs will include:

- lost opportunities for residents to fulfil their potential;
- distress to parents as they observe the impact and problems caused by inappropriate placement;
- failure to protect residents from abuse, medical expenses and possible legal action;
- work cover claims;
- high staff turnover;
- low staff morale;
- destruction of property; and
- prolonged periods of high dependency.

independent living. With minimal guidance, he is self-sufficient in his own home, and able to give directions when help is required. He prepares and cooks his own meals, and does daily household tasks. He was unable to do these things at the group home.

Initially staff provided 24 hour support, however Oliver is now able to be on his own at night. Staff began by leaving him for five minutes at a time, until eventually he was confident that staff would return in the morning. Oliver's parents were initially worried that he would be on his own, but now hope that others may be reassured by telling his story.

What makes the difference?

Oliver's start in life is not unusual for many people with disabilities who are considered to have challenging behaviours and yet his life was able to flourish when his skills and interests were matched to appropriate home and work environments with adequate support.

Many parents and staff can be so fearful for people like Oliver that they risk limiting their potential, and visitors often see people with lesser disabilities living in more restricted and unsuitable settings. With a relaxed approach to thoughtful planning, a service can gradually improve the quality of life for residents by reducing frustrated outbursts and delivering more opportunities for independence.

People with challenging behaviour may always need support staff. However in the right environment the triggers for outbursts can be minimised.

Oliver has achieved dignity, status and recognition in his community by moving from a situation where he was continually anxious and tense, to one where he feels secure and in control.