

## THE HAVEN'S INDEPENDENT LIVING PROGRAM

**Cynthia Rubenstein, M.S.,**  
*Independent Living Program*  
*The Haven, Inc., Boca Raton, Florida*

### Introduction

Independent living programs have been developed at a rapid rate since it was determined in the 1980s that almost 40% of the youth in the foster care system would not go home or be adopted by the time they turned 18. A variety of programs have been implemented (North, et al, 1988; Mech and Leonard, 1988). The Haven developed an independent living program in April 1988 with an innovative child and youth care approach that goes beyond skill training and focuses on individual intellectual, emotional, and maturational development.

Residents in this program are identified as survivors of their pasts rather than victims of their childhoods. They are encouraged to assume responsibility for their choices as we help them work through issues of dependence, familial relationships, and personal accountability. Life skills are learned through experiencing natural consequences. Each choice is seen as a positive learning experience on the path to adulthood. Problems are reframed as opportunities for growth. Mutual respect for youth and staff is promoted.

Using a holistic approach, staff members relate to youth on adult-to-adult basis rather than adult-to-child. While staff and youth process on different levels, issues of independence are shared by everyone. In this context the relationship between staff and youth is the catalyst for change (Trieschman, et al., 1969) and the fit between youth and caregiver (Maier, 1982) is extended into a mutual uncovering and reflection of personal growth.

At the ILP, staff members make positive changes in their lives as well. I have pursued my journey towards understanding and growth through examining my own dependence and independence. This mutuality is the essence of the ILP. Staff move from role to self models. By being ourselves we expose our strengths and weaknesses to the youth as they expose theirs to us. Following is a detailed program description.

## Overview

The independent living program was developed at The Haven when it became apparent that many of the residents in our therapeutic group home (for troubled, abused, and neglected youth) were too old for successful placement and unable to return home. The ILP program is funded by private funds and a grant from the Children's Service Council of Palm Beach County. While initially targeted for The Haven group home residents, the need in the community necessitated opening the ILP for other youth in the foster care system.

## Program Philosophy

Adolescent development is characterized by a search for identity (Erikson, 1960). For adolescents in out-of-home placement, the search for identity can be delayed. Youth in foster care or residential placement often have strong dependency needs as a result of family disruption. Residential treatment centers by their nature often promote dependence as a part of treatment. Recognizing the unmet dependency needs of children in care, child-care facilities encourage residents to become dependent on caregivers. The transition from residential care to life on one's own involves the creation of a new set of personalized daily tasks.

The Haven's ILP provides a secure base from which youth can explore and practice the adult world of freedom and responsibility. The program eases the transition from the foster care system to adult independence by enabling the youths to assume responsibility for their lives. This concept of placing the authority with the client is linked to the deinstitutionalization model of the mental health community (Medders & Coleman, 1985; Johnson, Vinnicombe & Merrill, 1980). Like other ILPs, it is experientially based so that youth learn daily living skills by practicing them in a "real life" setting (The Bridge, 1985; Furth, Jr., 1983, Mauzerall, 1983).

## Admission Criteria

Florida's Department of Health and Rehabilitative Services (HRS) has established criteria for teens in the foster care system to move on to independent living status. An adolescent in the custody of the state who transfers to independent living status receives a cash subsidy and in some cases is free to move alone into an apartment in the community. Many of The Haven's ILP clients are in state custody so the program cri-

teria closely follows HRS guidelines.

The Haven's ILP admission criteria are: 1) approved by HRS counselor and/or parents; 2) demonstrated ability to obtain and hold a job; 3) demonstrated regular attendance at school, vocational program or GED prep; 4) reached 17th birthday at time of admission; 5) remained free of any criminal convictions; 6) maintained specific behavioral standards as defined by The Haven's level system for at least two months prior to entry; 7) established and maintained a current savings account of at least \$500. These criteria are designed to provide incentive for youth living in The Haven's group home where youth who are approaching their 17th birthdays begin to seek employment and to save money.

Youth applying for admission from programs other than The Haven group home can have employment, financial and educational requirements adjusted if they have been in environments in which these activities were impossible to carry out. In these instances, youth enter the program on a thirty-day probationary period in which they must obtain consistent employment and enroll in an educational program. The financial requirement enables youth to pay the start-up housing costs. Youth who have been unable to earn and save money pay increased monthly program fees until all start-up costs have been paid.

## **The Program**

The Haven's ILP is based on youth taking responsibility for their own choices. The program is built on the following assumptions: 1) youth in the program are developmentally ready to function appropriately without 24-hour supervision; 2) youth learn best by experiencing natural consequences of their behavior; 3) youth in the program are not victims of their childhood experiences and are able to make peace with the past.

The program is housed in a duplex with one unit for boys and one for girls. Total capacity is six, three residents to each apartment. Similar to a trend at The Haven group home, there are consistently more females than males in residence.

Youth who are interested in ILP contact the program manager around their 17th birthday. An initial interview is held in which the youth's future goals and feelings about his/her family are explored. Youth who are close to making the admission criteria work on a contract with the program manager and complete the Daniel Memorial Independent Living Skill Assessment (Bishop, et al., 1988).

The youth sign a six-month lease. The document is designed to

approximate a “real world” lease. The youth are aware that they can leave the program before the six-month time frame elapses and that they can be evicted if they do not maintain program standards. They may also choose to leave at any time on their own accord. If this occurs, a financial payment is mutually agreed upon by the manager and resident. Youth are free to leave at any time.

Each youth agrees to pay 1/4 share of the monthly utilities. They each pay \$25 for food per week whether they are eating at home or not. The Haven also pays a share for groceries and utilities to cover staff expenses.

Youth also sign a general agreement upon entry to the program. The lease and agreement comprise the program regulations. The terms of the agreement specify the responsibilities of both residents and The Haven.

Few consequences are imposed if residents do not follow their agreements. Warning notices are issued and repeated infractions can result in an eviction. The warning notices are issued at the discretion of the staff based on the resident’s behavior and other therapeutic issues. This approach is used to eliminate undue dependency. In other words, if they know that two warnings may result in eviction, they may be tempted to push the limit, a continuation of learned manipulative behavior. Occasionally, restrictions will be placed on curfew. However, the goal of the program is to teach personal responsibility through internal motivation, not through external restrictions.

The residents are required to save 10% of their monthly income. Residents in the custody of the state and on independent living status receive a subsidy from the state based on their monthly earnings. Private placements are subsidized by their families. If family subsidy is not available, program fees are adjusted downward.

One staff member, a night supervisor, is on duty each night from 8:00 p.m. until 6:00 a.m. The program manager is on the premises primarily during weekday business hours and one evening per week in addition to being on 24-hour call in case of an emergency. Residents are responsible for getting to school on time. They maintain their apartments and are responsible for planning, shopping and preparing meals. The staff is available to offer assistance, but little formalized instruction takes place.

The primary principle is learning by doing and asking for help. For example, the residents who have lived in The Haven group home have both practiced and helped the cook prepare meals. Now they must do it on their own. Many of the youths also cooked while living at home and cooking again links them with their past. They often are not receptive to instruction until they have tried on their own. Other youth tend to resist

help with budgeting until a first paycheck is blown. The purpose is to give youth a chance to find their own best way of learning. Learning is achieved only when it is desired by the learner.

### **Therapeutic Issues**

Adolescence is commonly thought to be a recapitulation of Mahler's (Mahler, et al., 1975) separation-individuation process (Kaplan 1984; Mishne, 1986). Successful adolescent development includes the formation of a separate identity outside the family (Erikson, 1960). At the same time, it is necessary to resolve past issues. Without a strong sense of inner security, these youths tend to feel that they are not up to the challenge of making it on their own (Peck, 1978). They often blame their families for personal feelings of unworthiness and insecurity (Beyer, 1986). Attempting to develop a sense of independence with an "I am not enough" attitude and its accompanying anger is difficult. Adult encouragement towards independence is often met with resistance caused by the fear of being exposed. The Haven's ILP attempts to provide a safe space that allows youth to reconnect with their families so they can heal old wounds.

Family contact is at the discretion of each youth. Most of the youth in the program attempt to contact their family of origin shortly after entering the ILP. Staff members do not intervene, but offer support and guidance in helping youth process ambivalent feelings. Youth are able to proceed at their own pace with their families. The residents may choose to spend holidays and weekends with their families and, for some, returning home as a semi-adult transforms earlier relationship patterns. For example, one resident contacted her family and spent the first Christmas in five years with her father.

On the other hand, some youth are unable to work without resolving dysfunctional old patterns. One youth who was evicted from the program returned to his family and chose to remain the "problem child."

Providing individual therapy to residents has been an issue with which the program has struggled. Initially, residents were to seek therapy from community providers. However, lack of transportation made this impossible. South Florida communities cover a large geographical area with no adequate public transportation. Subsequently, the therapist at The Haven group home was asked to provide services to ILP residents. This was not the preferred choice because youth were able to remain closely linked to the group home rather than focusing on separa-

tion. Currently the program has a contractual provider and services are provided at the ILP facility.

### **Role of Staff**

The staff in the ILP assume a different role than traditional child care workers in residential settings, taking a less active role in the day-to-day decisions and behaviors of the residents. Youth are encouraged to take responsibility for themselves. Staff do not wake them in the mornings, monitor their off-premises activities or set consequences for negative behaviors such as smoking, cursing or keeping disorderly bedrooms. Staff provide support and guidance at the youth's request.

Staff monitor each resident's ability to meet program expectations at weekly staff meetings. Discussions about a youth's progress are held at weekly house meetings with all staff and residents in attendance. Individual discussions are also held between staff members and residents. Allowing residents to take responsibility for their actions by not invoking consequences or providing constant supervision is one of the most difficult tasks for the ILP staff; Independent Living staff must derive satisfaction from observing residents assume responsibility without providing much direct assistance. They encourage youth to make choices, rather than attempt to make choices for them.

### **The ILP Site**

The ILP is housed in a duplex in Delray Beach, Florida, a neighboring town of Boca Raton where The Haven group home is located. The site was chosen to create a clear-cut separation between the two programs and the physical distance has been beneficial in this regard. However, it has also created some difficulties. Youth preparing to come to the ILP from The Haven must establish a work history. They typically find employment in close proximity to The Haven group home. Once at the ILP, they have no transportation and cannot keep the job. If they find a job close to the ILP before they enter the program, there is no transportation while they are at the group home. Lack of reliable public transportation is a geographical problem which has required some creative problem solving. Youth in this situation may take up to five days after they move into the ILP to find a new job close to the duplex. Switching jobs at the time of transition from the group home to the ILP is an added stressor.

The duplex is located in a residential neighborhood. The program does not have a designated name other than the ILP or "the house." The facility is set up so that residents can live as unobtrusively as possible, simply residents of the neighborhood and not as youth living in a program. The residents refer to the duplex as "our house" and the program manager as "the landlord." The youth take great pride in maintaining the property which is owned by The Haven. Members of the Board of Directors of The Haven have worked with the youth to upgrade the grounds by planting shrubbery and laying new sod. Residents and staff have met others on the block and the youth frequently visit with neighbors.

Parents or HRS representatives sign an entrance agreement that clearly states there will not be 24-hour supervision. The Haven is not the legal custodian of any ILP resident. Youth in custody of the state must have an HRS representative sign for any medical treatment. Private placement residents require parental consent for medical treatment.

Independent living programs involve risk-taking on the part of the agency sponsoring them. In that sense the program parallels the risks taken by youth who are moving toward independence. The youth cannot grow without venturing forth into new areas. If programs are to respond to the need for youth to become independent, they must venture forth also. For The Haven, the risk-taking has been most gratifying.

## Conclusion

The term "independent living" does not adequately describe the path youth follow in making it on their own. The more accurate term is "responsible living." Youth require the opportunity to take responsibility for the choices they make. Changing terminology is more than an issue of semantics.

Responsible living implies that the youth take control of their lives. A subtle shift in programming results from switching to a mind set of responsibility rather than skill mastery. The emphasis becomes one in which youth actively create the changes in their lives rather than one in which they respond and react to adult-generated activities.

Youth have taught The Haven staff members much about learning to live responsibly. The growth of the program during its first year has been the result of The Haven staff and residents learning from each other. We have faced the challenge!

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**About the Author:**

Cynthia Rubenstein has an MS in child development/child care from the University of Pittsburgh. She has twelve years experience working with children in a variety of settings. Ms. Rubenstein is a mental health counselor and manages an Independent Living Program for older adolescents leaving foster care.