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I am grateful to have this opportunity to testify before the Mental Health and Wellness Commission. This will afford me the ability to address some concerns I have in the area of affordable housing for people with mental barriers. Moreover, to specifically target those individuals diagnosed with Autism. Housing for individuals with Autism is already scarce and left unaddressed it will become an even bigger problem in the future. A stable and safe environment will help insure success for anyone, but for people with Autism it is critical. There are many avenues of support for people with Autism and all these avenues need to be addressed and given the opportunity. I would like to speak on all of them, but today, I would like to focus on the housing piece of the puzzle. I would like to offer the Commission, the role our organization has played in providing housing for young adults diagnosed with Autism.

Bridgewood NPHC is based in Escanaba, MI and has been in operation since December of 1978. In its nearly 35 years of operation, we have tried to set the bar in housing for people with mental barriers. I think we have accomplished that, certainly in the Escanaba area. In the beginning it was not always an easy road. For years, Bridgewood did what it could with the limited resources that were available. It wasn't until UPCAP became the Administrative Agent for Bridgewood, that we were able to make changes to the Bridgewood program which we never thought were possible. UPCAP was like a shot in the arm for Bridgewood. As an agency, UPCAP is a well managed, well organized and an extremely caring non-profit organization. Bridgewood is lucky to have them at the helm and proud to be teamed with the UPCAP name. I am certain, with what Bridgewood had to offer and being part of the UPCAP team, is why our local CMH approached us for this project. There was a need for a six bed group home. It was to be tailored toward young adults with Autism and our agency was at the top of the list for the task.

In October of 2012, we were approached by Pathways in regard to Bridgewoods capability to open a six bed home specifically targeting individuals with Autism. In the beginning there were many unknowns. No one in the Pathways catchment area (Alger, Marquette, Luce and Delta Co.) had ever attempted this before. Knowing this home would be unique and in reality, the most needed type of housing for the immediate future, we set out to explore options. At first we thought of new construction. A tailor made perfect living environment, everyone with their own bedroom and bathroom. It was to be a ranch style home with three bedrooms on each end with

UPCAP (the Upper Peninsula Commission for Area Progress) is a local 501 (c)(3) charitable organization, responsible for development, coordination, and provision of human, social, and community resources within the Upper Peninsula of Michigan. In 1974, UPCAP was designated as the Region XI (U.P.) Area Agency on Aging whose purpose is to advocate for and provide services to older adults residing in the 15 counties of the Upper Peninsula.

a commons area and a kitchen in the middle. Unfortunately, a short time later, it was apparent this would not be an option for us. The cost of new construction was more than our resources would allow. The total cost of the project could have easily reached \$450,000.00.

We had to refocus and try to find an existing building to meet our needs, which proved to be easier said than done. After two months of searching for a building, we found a home once used as a group home. The problem was, for the last fifteen years it had been used as a single family home. The house was in need of extensive remodeling. In addition to the existing layout, we would need to construct an office area, two bedrooms and one more bathroom. The home also needed many upgrades to include plumbing, wiring, flooring, insulation and a new well, to name a few. Although to accomplish this would be expensive, it was our only affordable alternative.

During the remodeling phase, Bridgewood worked hand in hand with the Pathways and the parents of the individuals that would reside in the new home. Most of these parents were of retirement age looking for placement for their loved ones. These parents came from many walks of life. The backgrounds of the parents consisted of a doctor, special education teacher, social worker, farmer, ect. Even with all the diversity in this group of families, they all had a common thread. They all wanted a safe place for their young men and women to live. Somewhere they would be treated as family, treated with dignity and respect and taught the skills they would need to someday live on their own. Bridgewood being a small organization has always been family oriented and this would give us an advantage with the success of this new program. Still there were many concerns, but one stood out above all of them. How could we take six people, from six different backgrounds, put them in a 3,400 square foot home, add Autism and have it turn into the family atmosphere we wanted. It seemed impossible. We needed a good strategy.

After much deliberation, the answer was simple; we would try not to change anything. Our plan would be to try and incorporate as much of their life with their parents, into their life at Bridgewood. This theory would come into play during the remodel phase. We would try and simulate their bedrooms, the layout of the house, lighting, furniture placement and so on, right down to the color of their pillow case. In order to do this, we met countless times with the parents and Pathways to learn everything possible about our new friends. We explored all the likes and dislikes for everyone. Food appeared to be at the top of the list, so we made sure we had everyone's favorites on hand. The transition would be crucial to our success. The parents played the biggest part in this phase. They wrote down or explained everything they could think of that may come up in the transition. By the end of this process, we had come to know the parents, their sons and daughter very well. They became family and the bond that we share will last a life time. After all the information was gathered and all the preparation was done, we felt ready to open the doors on this long awaited endeavor. These parents were about to put the lives of their loved ones in our hands. This is a job one takes very seriously. These are type of people you don't want to disappoint, they are family, and they are friends

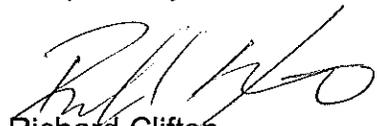
We opened the doors to Bridgewood Soo Hill on May 1st, 2013. We were all both excited and concerned, wondering if we had done everything we could have to be successful. We now have been open for six weeks and it appears all the preparation has paid off. Everyone has made it through the transition period extremely well. These young adults are very comfortable in their new home and very proud to be living on their own. There are already strong friendships

forming, which is not an easy thing to do for someone with Autism. With the structure that is provided in the home, people who haven't worked are, and those that were working have better attendance and their pay has increased. With this extra money they are able to be more involved in the community. They also have a new level of confidence about them. In the past they would have looked down or away to avoid eye contact when spoken to, even by their parents. Now most can look you straight in the eye and have a conversation with you, tell you their needs and what they would like to do. This program is everything we hoped for. It has met everyone's expectations and more. We have been dealing with one small problem though, these fine young men and women wish their parents would quit stopping by and to quit calling so much. I think you could safely say, the parents are having a much harder time with this situation than their children. If this Commission could see this program at work, you would want to build a hundred of these homes. I know I have painted a rosy picture, but I wanted to stress to this Commission how important projects like these are to people with Autism. With a little hard work and dedicated staff you can achieve what everyone wants, independence for people with Autism young and old.

Though there are many obstacles in the way of achieving independence for people with Autism, by far the most obvious is funding. In our case, we were fortunate UPCAP was able to fund our project. Although the new project has been a success, it will be years before we would have the means to fund another and the need is now. In our area alone, we could have filled our project three times over. It's hard to tell a parent or guardian you only have six beds and they are all taken. You can watch the hope drain from their face. Of course you know what the next question is "will you be opening another home soon" and again you disappoint, telling them there is no funding for another home. With the help of this Commission we can stop the disappointment. I submit to you, we have an overwhelming need for funding in the area of housing. People with Autism or any other mental barrier should be able to live with dignity, respect and as independently as possible.

I feel a program should be developed to provide low interest loans to non- profit organizations such as UPCAP and Bridgewood. Perhaps these funds could be disbursed through MSHDA. A program solely designed to ease the burden of providing affordable housing to people with Autism and other mental barriers. I urge the Commission to consider such a program. There are many of us willing to take on the challenges of housing, but lack the resources. I fear left unattended or ignored this problem will rapidly spiral out of control. Please do not let this issue reach critical mass before it is addressed. The people we serve deserve better. I thank you for your time and consideration.

Respectfully submitted,



Richard Clifton
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