



ENGAGING COMMUNITIES FOR CHILDREN'S SUCCESS

Today in America, more than 100,800 children live in residential care facilities, such as group homes, designed to help children who cannot live in a typical family or foster home due to behavior or other issues.

As the need for this type of intensive care facility grows, agencies' ability to find and fund new sites for residential or group homes has become more difficult. Sadly, it has become commonplace for people to oppose such facilities in their neighborhood. Generally such opposition is in response to commonly held misunderstandings about a residential facility's impact on the area surrounding it: Won't a group home bring down the value of my property? Doesn't a group home in my neighborhood put me or my family in danger? How can kids who can't behave well enough to live in a family be expected to behave properly here?

Member organizations of CHSA are committed to promoting the healthy development of all children, especially those whose life experiences of abuse or neglect have left them vulnerable and struggling. Our members are dispelling the myths and misunderstandings about group homes, residential treatment and other forms of foster care. And we are dedicated to engaging neighborhoods and individuals in the work of helping our children develop to their highest potential. Research clearly shows that behaviorally-challenged children who are welcomed into a safe residential center, learn new coping skills, and enjoy a healthy childhood, have the best chance at lifelong success. Working with communities to promote healthy child development, no matter where a child lives, is at the heart of Children's Home Society of America's mission. CHSA agencies are working with all facets of communities to create safe places for kids.

TEEN ZONE GROUP HOME IN DELAND, FLORIDA

When Children's Home Society of Florida purchased a large home in an attractive, middle-class, suburban village near the city of DeLand in 1996, the agency knew it would be the perfect place for kids. The home was slated to become the new site for the organization's TEEN ZONE program, a residential group home for eight boys. The youths were all victims of abuse, neglect and abandonment.

In preparation for TEEN ZONE's relocation, the Society hired a new program director and contracted with a beloved local psychologist to nurture the program and the kids it serves. The initial mandate to these leaders: completely redesign the clinical program. They were asked to structure the program in its new setting around the guiding principle of "*personal responsibility in daily living*." The residents were to build personal skills and learn respect for themselves as well as respectful cooperation with peers, staff, teachers, neighbors and members of the community.

Weeks before the move-in date, the local Children's Home Society of Florida Executive Director and the program's new director walked door to door around the area where the home was located. They met with neighbors, distributed fliers about the Society and its programs, and explained the goals for TEEN ZONE. Neighbors were invited to attend a town meeting to learn more about the program.



Unfortunately, one long-time resident and local business owner was deeply disturbed over the location of the Society's group home for troubled teens. He organized the neighbors in opposition to the home and led a vigorous attack against the plan at the town meeting. This scenario has played out again and again across the country as neighbors grapple with their own fears and misunderstandings about group care as well as their stereotypes about children who are victims of abuse.

To complicate matters, the opposing neighbors found a county ordinance that mandated that no more than six unrelated people could occupy a single-family dwelling. The neighbors hired an attorney and the Society's request for an exception to the six-person ordinance was denied. No other option, the Society went to court and the city council's decision was overturned.

Over several weeks, eight boys moved into TEEN ZONE. Group home staffers were encouraged to interact with neighbors and the young residents of the home were encouraged to live and relate like kids in any typical community provided they followed the program's guiding principle. School friends and peers from the local neighborhood were invited to play at the group home after school and even come for dinner. At the same time, group home boys were allowed to accept invitations to neighbors' homes. Gradually the barriers disappeared and TEEN ZONE kids were virtually adopted by the community.

The neighbor who vigorously opposed the home even caught the community caring bug too. He eventually approached the group home staff with an apology. He asked what he could do in support of the project and was invited to create an advisory board of neighbors to mentor the boys and help support the work of TEEN ZONE.

Since that time, the advisory board and residents have joined to participate in the "Adopt a Road" project, working together to pick up trash on the two-mile stretch of US 17 that borders the neighborhood. Neighbors have also built a lighted outdoor basketball court at TEEN ZONE – a place where residents and other neighborhood children can play together. As one neighbor so aptly said, "They are all our kids!"

Both Children's Home Society of Florida and the neighbors of TEEN ZONE have learned valuable lessons from their history together. Chief among them is this: Working together and engaging the broadest sectors of communities—from neighbors to social service organizations to businesses—communities can overcome major hurdles. Together they can make a difference for children in need. One neighborhood in Florida proved that by using a positive approach to change attitudes, they could create safe, loving, welcoming places for kids.