

INDEPENDENCE CENTER PARENT HANDBOOK

INTRODUCTION

Established as a non-profit California corporation in 1985, INDEPENDENCE CENTER operates a non-sectarian program for young adults with learning disabilities. The age range is typically 18-30+ years and includes both men and women.

The Program meets the needs of the average - low average group of young people with learning disabilities who graduate from high school and need training for independent living.

INDEPENDENCE CENTER was founded by a group of parents brought together by Ms. Sandy D. Gordon. These parents had adolescents who were nearing the completion of high school. They had searched for a program which would provide services for their young people. They recognized that their 'children' continued to fall within the gap of services. The founders took it upon themselves to help fill that gap.

PHILOSOPHY

Individuality

INDEPENDENCE CENTER is based on the premise that each person is unique and that each person with learning disabilities poses a unique challenge for the professional working with him/her. Each young person's neurological dysfunction, needs, style, personality, and coping mechanisms are essential ingredients for program planning. All skills are taught to maximize the individual's capabilities to work on his/her own and *all* aspects of the program are *individualized* to incorporate the person's *unique* needs.

Supportive Group Setting

Learning to be independent is best 'taught' by living away from home, in a group setting where the young adults gain the benefit of the peer group. Social skills and relationships are part of the everyday group living experience. Staff works with the young adults to get the feedback on their ability to live among others.

'Hands-on' Is The Best Way To Learn

All skills are taught in the apartments, as the young adults need to learn by doing. These concrete learning experiences are most beneficial, and replace the classroom learning of previous school years. Special teaching tools, such as a special cookbook and 'recipes' for cleaning are utilized.

The Family Context

Each young adult is viewed as part of their family system, and this is reflected in the family-oriented support services at the Center. Families are helped to develop a new perception of their 'special child': a competent, capable adult. Ongoing parent-staff contacts are the vehicle to accomplish this goal.

It seems to be a common experience that families with special children do more things *for* that child rather than allow them to do for themselves. 'Letting go' of that special child is more difficult, as parents tend to worry more about their well-being.

INDEPENDENCE CENTER seeks to foster positive self-esteem and a view of self as competent. Mistakes made along the way are viewed as opportunities to learn. Families are encouraged to share our view.

Program Staff

The Executive Director of INDEPENDENCE CENTER is Judy Maizlish. The Administrative Director is Gloria Ogletree. In addition, around the clock supervision include: Cleo Ingram, Houseparent, who provides continuity and supervision overnights, and lives on the premises. The counselors carry out the program weekdays and evenings with the residents. On weekends, the counselors sleepover and provide supervision and social activities for the residents.

Center Leadership

INDEPENDENCE CENTER is directed by a Board of Directors, who oversee the fiscal operation of the program, set overall program goals and policies, and engage in fundraising activities. The Board is not involved in the daily operation of the program, nor are they apprised of confidential matters.

The daily operation of the program is supported by the ongoing feedback of the Professional Advisory Board. The members of this inter-disciplinary team are prominent experts on learning disabilities who lend their expertise to the staff. Individual residents or families may be referred to the individuals on the Professional Advisory Board, or staff may bring such matters to this Board for their expert opinion.

PRE-ADMISSION SCREENING

Anyone interested in applying is encouraged to call for an on-site visit prior to formally applying. All applicants must be at least 18 years old and have completed high school by the time of admission. An applicant must complete the application form and sign authorizations to release previous records directly to INDEPENDENCE CENTER.

Upon receipt of completed application forms and release forms, staff send for psychological, neurological, educational and vocational evaluations. These assessments are utilized for screening.

Criteria

INDEPENDENCE CENTER accepts clients without regard to sex, ethnic group, race, religion, or financial status. Clients must have diagnosed learning disabilities, within the generally accepted definition: A difficulty in processing information, visually or auditorially that is not due to mental retardation, emotional difficulties, or other physical handicaps. This includes: perceptual impairment, minimal brain dysfunction, attention deficit disorder, dyslexia, developmental aphasia, mild cerebral palsy, and seizure disorder.

The young adult must be motivated to learn to be independent, and cooperative with authority. Serious emotional difficulties are screened out.

The Interview

The applicant and his/her family are invited to come to the Center for an intake interview with the Executive Director. They will receive information about the program, a tour, and will be asked questions about themselves (separately and as a family).

Based on reports on file and information gleaned during the interview, the applicant may be asked back for a 3-day orientation visit.

The 'Orientation Weekend'

During the 3-day visit, the young adult sleeps over 2 nights and spends 3 days involved in normal program activities. These enable the staff to assess his/her skills and allow the young adult the opportunity to get a sense of the program. Only those applicants considered appropriate and who *want* to participate are accepted into the program.

The Family Faces 'Letting Go'

It is strongly recommended that family discussions about moving out take place all along the application process. Pointing out the normal experience of moving out, as can be

demonstrated by other siblings or neighbors who have made the transition to college, work, marriage, etc., can be helpful. Visiting the facility can be helpful to all involved.

An ongoing dialogue should continue in a loving, positive manner. Affirming the difficulty of moving out, and of all transitions, will help alleviate some of the anxiety about leaving home. Professional intervention can be helpful.

Preparation which includes more than purchasing and packing one's things is more likely to facilitate a better adjustment to the new environment.

Entering the Program

Once the screening is completed, the young adult is placed on a waiting list for admission. A moving date will be targeted for the family.

A contract is mailed to each family, which details the services provided and the family's obligation. A list of suggested items, including amount of clothing is included.

As the young person moves in, they are helped to feel at home, and given further orientation as to the expectations of the program.

THE PROGRAM

The Program is situated at the Westwood Club Apartments in West Los Angeles, in a neighborhood which is accessible by public transportation and which is near all services. The living situation *is* the learning environment. Staff is on duty 24 hours a day to provide supervision of tasks and to intervene as problems arise.

Young adults participate in one of three program levels.

Residential

The Residential Program provides the structure needed for those young adults making their initial transition to independent living or for those who have been in other programs but still need full support services.

Transition

The next step for those young adults who have completed the initial part of the Program but who need less supervision and are employed.

Outreach

Outreach services are available for young adults who have successfully completed a residential program or have lived on their own but can still benefit from assistance from our staff in one or more areas.

Skills: Apartment Living

Clients learn how to prepare nutritious meals, cook, clean, market, and share an apartment with others. As the client learns the task and needs less supervision, he/she works more independently.

All activities are structured for the client, so that he/she learns through the repetition of doing the tasks. Forms for menu planning and shopping are utilized. The special cookbook forms the basis for menu planning as well as cooking.

Apartment meetings help teach communications and problem-solving skills.

Skills: Socialization

Appropriate social behavior is an essential part of adult functioning. Social skills are taught in a group as well as via feedback on a continual basis. Included are conversation, building and maintaining relationships, appropriate work behavior, dealing with authority, etc.

Skills: Vocational Guidance

Each young adult is assessed for their readiness for paid employment. A vocational plan is developed with the client which includes the following possible steps:

- a) *Job Exploration:* a vocational assessment and/or volunteer experience helps determine job choices, and enables staff to assess behaviors needing improvement.

- b) *Job Training:* Once a career direction is determined, the young adult can participate in vocational training or an apprenticeship. Staff follow up with training supervisors to monitor the clients progress and determine behaviors which need further refinement.

- c) *Job Placement:* This is the goal for all clients, and is achieved by developing a job search strategy. This would include development of resume, learning interview skills, looking through the newspapers for job listings, calling for interviews, and going on the interview. Identification of the learning disability at the time of application is helpful to the employer in knowing what to expect. Staff can be helpful in developing accommodation strategies, where necessary.

- d) *Job Maintenance:* Once the client is working a vocational assistant may accompany the young persons initially on the job. Sometimes this helps ensure proper

learning of the job tasks. Some individuals are able to learn the new job on their own. For all clients, the vocational staff call the employer once a week or once every two weeks, to find out how the client is performing on the job and to intervene where necessary. Once the employer understands the young person's disability and learns the best way to give him/her instructions, the job is often secure.

Skills: Personal Growth and Development

Individual counseling is necessary for each client, either with their therapist in the community or in-house. Even when the client sees the therapist in the community, participating in the daily living situation is therapeutic. Clients work to improve self-esteem, separation from family, confidence, sexuality, hygiene and grooming, and adjusting to being an adult.

Family Involvement

It is essential that parents work together with staff to facilitate independent functioning. as the young person participates in the program, a new relationship will develop: a relationship with an adult child. Frequent visits home or visits by parents to the apartment can be counter-productive to the goal of adjusting to the new setting. Frequent phone calls to the apartment or to the parent also interfere with the opportunity for the young adult to learn to solve his or her own problems.

In order for the parents and the young adult to derive maximum growth from the program, it is important for the parents and staff to support each other. This commitment is essential for a successful program. Open communication is a key ingredient. If parents are dissatisfied or concerned about something, they should discuss this directly with the Program Director. Complaints made to each other or friends will not alleviate the discomfort. In some cases, the Director may refer the family to the Professional Advisory Board, or the family may wish to initiate the contact with that Board.

It is often difficult for parents to 'let go' and allow the staff of INDEPENDENCE CENTER to set goals and establish limits. The Director and the staff are available to help in this process.

QUESTIONS OFTEN ASKED

1. How long will it take for my son/daughter to adjust to living at INDEPENDENCE CENTER? How long will it take us?

The usual period of adjustment for young adults who first move into INDEPENDENCE CENTER is 3-6 months. Parents are often surprised to find they they, too, have an adjustment period once their son/daughter leaves the home. The time of adjustment for parents varies.

2. How often should I visit and call my son/daughter?

Frequent visits to the apartment by parents or by the young adult to the family home often interferes with the initial adjustment. You should plan to speak by phone once or twice a week. Visits should be planned in advance, no more than twice a month.

3. If my son/daughter calls with a problem or asks for money, what should I do?

It is important that you listen with empathy, and then direct your son/daughter to discuss the problem with staff. In that way, you enable us to teach problem-solving skills. Remember to have your son/daughter bring up the issue to *staff* so that they do not rely on *your* problem-solving skills.

Since each young adult is following a budget plan, check with staff before agreeing to send extra money.

4. I want to be sure that my son/daughter is eating well. Can I check the refrigerator and cabinets when I visit the apartment? Should I bring food when I come?

All meals are planned a week in advance and are in accordance with the latest nutritional guidelines for healthy eating. Checking the refrigerator and cabinets (or any other part of the apartment) gives your son/daughter a message you really do not want to give. You want to communicate that you believe in their capabilities. Resist the urge to check up on them!

You are asked to refrain from supplementing the food your son/daughter purchases at the market. Their nutritional needs are taken care of in a way which promotes independence. We need your support for these efforts.

5. Will we be able to spend holidays together?

You plan on spending all major holidays together, if you so desire. Please discuss your plans with staff in advance. Staff coverage for these holidays is also available, as the program operates all year. Vacations should also be planned in advance so that they do not interfere with your son/daughter's vocational pursuits.

COMPLETION OF THE PROGRAM

In order to successfully complete the program, the individual needs demonstrate the following:

1. Working full time for at least one year.
2. Able to demonstrate ability to cook at least half the recipes in the INDEPENDENCE CENTER cookbook without assistance.
3. Able to demonstrate ability to clean independently.
4. No citations for at least 6 months.
5. Able to budget independently, if capable, or able to work with system developed with the primary counselor.
6. Able to maintain a checking account and savings account using accounting practices (i.e. reconciling bank statement, keeping checking records, etc.)
7. Able to use the ATM card responsibly.
8. Able to do marketing independently.
9. Does own laundry once a week.
10. Good personal hygiene and grooming.
11. Able to travel independently in the community.
12. Makes good use of leisure time.
13. Shows good judgement in making decisions.
14. Staff in agreement of overall readiness of resident to handle more independence.