**Effects of Environments on Group Homes**

 I have worked as a DSP at Amber House group home for the past two years. Generally, group homes are run by companies that give people a place to live. This could be for many types of individuals, but most commonly for the elderly and the mentally or physically disabled. Amber House is a group home for four individuals with various mental disabilities. Each client has different needs and abilities that are unique to them, so it is very important that there are direct support professionals (DSPs) who truly care and are committed to making sure that they get to know each client individually. In my experience at Amber House, only the DSPs who truly enjoy their job will last as employees because it is a tough job and you have to enjoy what you’re doing in order to want to keep doing it. I really enjoy working with all of my co-workers because I know that they enjoy their job just as much as I do. For this reason, I felt comfortable interviewing some of my co-workers about their opinions and experiences.

 I interviewed three different employees at Amber House including my boss. My boss, Annie Olson, has worked in group home environments for 26 years, so she has a lot of experience in this field. Annie’s official title is “Designated Coordinator” and this job involves a lot of office work, but also some direct care. Annie’s experience in different group homes has helped her to be such a great boss and coordinator because she knows what is needed to run an efficient group home and keep employees and clients happy. I also interviewed the household assistant, Gina Goettl, who also works as a DSP and Kyley Bullerman who is a DSP. Both women have also worked at other group homes and both mentioned how different their experiences at other group homes were. In their interviews, all of the interviewed staff discussed how at some other group homes, the staff don’t seem to care about keeping their clients involved in the community, family etc. and how their co-workers at those jobs seemed “lazy” and didn’t want to do anything with the clients. This is very different from Amber House because all of our clients are very family-oriented and love to do community activities as well as house activities.

 Personally, I have not worked in another group home, but I worked in an assisted living community where the environment was much different. At the assisted living home, the staff seemed to be very discouraged and unmotivated to do their job. I believe this was in part because they were understaffed so each staff member was over-worked and stressed. One of the biggest reasons that places like group homes and nursing homes are so understaffed is that the staff are underpaid. The average pay for a DSP in 2017 was $10.72, which is simply not enough for many people and they are forced to have multiple jobs (*America’s Direct Support Workforce Crisis*). The pay is not worth the work for many people and this has led to the annual DSP turnover rate of 45% (*America’s Direct Support Workforce Crisis*). I do think it’s still important to note that many of the staff were very negative towards the tasks they needed to do, the clients, and even me, a brand-new employee still in training.

I can say from personal experience, the negativity in this environment is a big reason I didn’t feel comfortable staying at this job. Having a negative attitude can shift the mood of those around you and that’s why it’s so important to try to be positive in these environments where you are caring for people in their home because they don’t want to be cared for by negative people all the time. One way I have found helps to keep a positive environment is to be a leader in positivity. I choose to go into work every day with a positive attitude because I know that as a leader, other people will be likely to follow my attitude and be positive. It is my philosophy that our time at work is not ours, but the clients and while everyone has bad days, it’s not acceptable to be consistently negative at work and potentially ruin the day of a client.

There have been other studies that agree with and confirm my thoughts: “Our findings suggest that the organizational environment is related directly to challenging behavior in people with intellectual disabilities, in addition to the indirect relationships (via support services) described by ecological theory (e.g., with the living environment, shared values)” (Olivier-Pijpers et al. 619). From this research, they found that not only indirect relationships, similar to what myself and my co-workers have experienced, affect behavior, but also organizational environment.

Organizational environment includes vision, values and sufficient resources given by the establishment or company (Olivier-Pijpers et al. 619). The vision and values of Amber House stem from how Amber House was created. When I was hired at Amber House, I was told some background information on how the group home started. It was created in the early 2000’s by the mother of one of the clients. She was motivated to create Amber House because she had two daughters with disabilities. Unfortunately, one of them passed away at a young age. With the experience of taking care of two children with disabilities, she knew the amount of work that went in to giving them the best care. This inspired her to start a group home that cared for its clients the way she cared for her own children. These values are instilled into each DSP when we are hired and in order to succeed at this job, we need to truly believe in these values and want the best for each client. If we believe in these values, we can see the difference in how each client acts and behaves towards us and others.

Another part of the vision of Amber House is to get each client involved in the community, both individually and as a house. As often or common as it is for people with disabilities to be out in the community, “It is often said that people with intellectual disabilities are present in the community but no part of it” (Clement and Bigby 159). Although this is the reality of many group homes, at Amber House, we strive to make sure that our clients are not only physically present at community activities but are also getting socially involved with others. This is so important for their quality of life and consequently how they feel and behave.

Throughout my time at Amber House, I have gotten to know how much of an impact a DSP can make on the lives of people with disabilities. By showing up to work with a positive attitude and having patience, I can see the difference in the quality of life of each client. It is clear to me that the environment in and around a group home have an effect not only on clients but staff members too. I have a feeling of gratification each time I work because I know I am helping them, even if it’s only a little bit, each day. I am so grateful to have a job as great as this one and will continue to put forth my best effort to increase the client’s qualities of life.

**Bibliography**

Clement, Tim., and Christine. Bigby. *Group Homes for People with Intellectual Disabilities Encouraging Inclusion and Participation*. Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2010.

Olivier‐Pijpers, Vanessa C., et al. “Influence of the Organizational Environment on Challenging Behaviour in People with Intellectual Disabilities: Professionals’ Views.” *Journal of Applied Research in Intellectual Disabilities*, vol. 32, no. 3, 2018, pp. 610–621., doi:10.1111/jar.12555.

*America’s Direct Support Workforce Crisis: Effects on People with Intellectual Disabilities, Families, Communities and the U.S. Economy*. 2017, *America’s Direct Support Workforce Crisis: Effects on People with Intellectual Disabilities, Families, Communities and the U.S. Economy*, acl.gov/sites/default/files/programs/2018-02/2017%20PCPID%20Full%20Report\_0.PDF.

Olson, Annie. Personal interview. 7 February 2020.

Goettl, Gina. Personal interview. 23 February 2020.

Bullerman, Kyley. Personal interview. 26 March 2020.

 In not only my personal experience, but also the personal experiences of the staff that I interviewed, it is clear that the environment around the clients can completely shift their mood. When staff or others come into the house with negative attitudes or negative behaviors, it can cause the clients to shift towards negative behaviors as well. our

findings suggest that the organizational environment is related di‐

rectly to challenging behaviour in people with intellectual disabili‐

ties, in addition to the indirect relationships (via support services)

described by ecological theory (e.g., with the living environment,

shared values).