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What is supported living? by Michelle Erstad

Simply put, supported living (SL) is providing assistance to adult clients of the regional center to help them live the lives they wish to have. SL is entirely person-based and person-directed, so, much like their goals and desires, no two individuals' SL arrangements will be identical. SL is about respecting a person's right to their choices, preferences, and lifestyle—even when it is not something you would chose for yourself. And while this concept is very open-ended, the complexity of it can be reduced by simply imagining your own desire for the space to live the life of your choosing. None of us would appreciate being told what to do, and when to do it. And most certainly, none of us would appreciate someone imposing their beliefs, values, or standards upon us, especially in our own home. The aid you provide will give the person the space to be him or herself and make his/her own choices, all while ensuring safety.

What supported living is **NOT**:

It is not trying to protect a person from the consequences of his/her choices (unless safety or legality is in question, which requires different action)

Like everyone, the people we serve learn and grow through trial and error. Even though we may be able to forecast the poor outcome of a person's choice, it is each individual's right to make that choice. We can support those

we serve in making wise and healthy choices, but ultimately, the final decision rests with them. We are not to impose upon them what we believe they should do. By the same token, we do not need to intervene and “fix” things once a choice has yielded unfavorable results. Each and every one of us learns through experience, and when we deprive those we serve the opportunity to have those experiences, we deprive them opportunities for growth and development.

For example:

Tina is on a fixed income, and only has \$80 left per month after paying bills to spend on whatever she wants. Tina’s SL staff help her manage her money and stay within her budget, however, this month, she spent it all within the first week. Although Tina’s SL staff reminded her about her budget, and how spending it all now would mean she wouldn’t have any left for the rest of the month, Tina still made the choice to spend it all at once. Although her SL staff could predict how upset Tina would be later in the month when she couldn’t go to the movies, or out to lunch, their job is to step back and pose no interference to Tina’s decision. Tina has the right to make her own choices, and the right to experience the consequences of those choices. Tina has not spent all of her money at the beginning of the month since.

Discussion:

Certainly, most of us can agree that it would be upsetting to have someone tell us what we can and cannot spend our money on. Our role is to respect the rights of those we serve to make their own choices. However, if ever an individual's safety is in jeopardy, or the person is committing illegal acts, and will not stop, it is our job to alert the appropriate authority as these situations *mandate reporting*.

It is not parenting (creating/enforcing rules or standards, or the establishment of ultimatums; discipline or lecturing)

Every individual we serve is an adult who deserves to be treated and respected as an adult. And even though we may play an important role in their lives, we are still guests in their homes and have no rights or authority over them, their belongings, their space, or their lifestyle. How they choose to

spend their time, what they choose to eat, with whom they choose to talk, who they wish to invite over, and how they wish to conduct themselves is not for us to judge or interfere with (unless the safety or legality of something is in question). To aid in putting this into perspective, we must again imagine how we would feel if someone came into our home and criticized our choice of activity, or told us we were spending too much time watching TV and not enough time on housework. We would not appreciate it if they nagged us, imposed a schedule for us to follow, or even took away our television, for example, as punishment. Being treated like a child certainly takes away an adult's sense of dignity, violates his/her basic human rights to freedom and choice, and belittles one's worth as a person.

For example:

*Alfred goes to a program during the day, but when he comes home in the afternoon, goes right on the computer or TV and often spends hours playing games and watching his favorite shows. His staff become concerned about his sedentary lifestyle and have invited Alfred to go out for a walk or go for an outing downtown, and have even spoken with him about the consequences of not getting any exercise. The staff, being concerned about Alfred, brainstorm other possible ideas to get him up and moving. One person suggests taking away Alfred's computer and TV. However, this idea is immediately discarded because taking away Alfred's possessions, especially as punishment, **is NOT** what supported living is all about. Alfred, like the rest of us, has the right to spend his time as he wishes. We are **NOT** to project upon Alfred what we believe he should be doing, or hold him to our own personal standards. We CAN make suggestions, but we CANNOT enforce anything.*

It is not providing more assistance than a person needs to be successful

The idea of SL is to foster greater independence in the people we work with. We are not helping them to grow and develop as individuals when we deprive them of the responsibilities of adulthood. There will certainly be tasks that require more assistance than others, but when we are too "helpful", it can cause more harm than good. It is about discovering what a person can accomplish without assistance, where they need help, and the degree of

involvement the individual needs from you in order to be successful. However, there is one caveat: even if the individual does not participate in the completion of tasks that he/she is capable of doing, it is our responsibility that they get done. Every person **MUST** have access to clean clothes, towels, and linens, and live in a tidy, clean house, even if they are unwilling to assist.

It is not being/knowing the solution

A significant part of the role you will play includes working with the individual to identify their options & choices and/or aiding them in locating qualified resources, and allowing them to arrive at their own decision. In other words, you do not need to know the answer to someone's problem or dilemma, nor do you need to automatically step in and *be* the solution. Our job is to help *guide* a person to a solution by helping them brainstorm possible options, or reach out to their friends, family, and other contacts that can provide support and input.

For example:

Megan really wants to go downtown Friday afternoon to meet up with friends for a coffee, and asks a staff member to drive her. Knowing Megan's level of independence, and her understanding of the public transportation system, the staff member suggests Megan take the bus. Megan is initially unhappy with this idea; she does not know which bus to take and is afraid that the bus stop will be too far away from the coffee shop. So, the staff sits down with Megan and they look over the bus schedule and routes, and determine the best one to take. However, the best bus stop is still a far walk from the coffee shop, and Megan is about to give up on the idea of taking the bus at all. The staff member works with Megan to identify the options available to her to get from the bus stop to the meeting point. Is there another bus she can take once she's downtown to get her closer? Can a friend meet her at the bus stop and drive her the rest of the way? Is there a different restaurant or café a little bit closer to the bus stop that the friends can meet at instead? Megan contacted a friend she was meeting up with, and together, they figured out how Megan can get the rest of the way. They even figured out how she can get home if they stay out later than the bus runs.

The idea of this example is that the staff member did not need to *be* the solution to Megan's transportation dilemma by agreeing to give her a ride, nor did she need to have all the answers as to how Megan should arrange her transportation.

The staff did the right thing by providing support and suggestions as to how she can meet her own needs and resolve the dilemma on her own.

As a supported living agency, our job does not entail taking on the problems of others and shouldering the burden for their resolution, but to assist them in finding their own solution.