

# Engaging Clients in Fire Prevention

By **The Providence Center**, Providence, Rhode Island

Winner: President's Award, 2006 Negley Awards for Excellence in Risk Management

**Summary:** *Most organizations have a fire safety protocol. Many have routine fire safety training for staff. But how many actually assess and involve clients in the education and prevention process? The Providence Center's unique fire safety program empowers clients with mental illness to remain as independent as possible in the community while reducing our organizational risk of fire in residential properties. Through the use of client fire education and a creative assessment tool, we ascertain a client's safety in the kitchen and include in their treatment plan a protocol for supervising their use of potentially hazardous equipment. Although the occurrence of a fire in May demonstrated we had a good fire response plan already in place, we developed an exemplary prevention mechanism for further reducing the likelihood of a fire occurrence.*

**The Importance of Fire Safety:** The Providence Center (TPC) provides housing to those with persistent mental illness in eight group homes, transitional housing programs and apartments throughout Rhode Island. Our responsibility to keep clients safe has always been paramount. The danger fire poses to disabled and mentally ill clients living in subsidized housing is very real - recently a fire killed a disabled veteran living in a rooming house in North Providence, Rhode Island, and injured another tenant and three firefighters. The cause of the fire was determined to be improper use and disposal of smoking materials. This tragedy is an example of the many "wake-up calls" that exist to organizations like ours who provide safe housing to those with mental or physical disabilities.

The Providence Center's "wake-up call" happened in May 2005 in TPC's Nashua Street Supervised Apartment Program for persistently mentally ill adults:

*A panicked client burst into the staff office, yelling "fire!" at the top of his lungs. Without skipping a beat, the staff person on duty rushed to the client's apartment only to find the stove and cabinets engulfed in flames. According to the staff, his "training kicked into action." He raced out of the apartment to pull the fire alarm, grab the nearby fire extinguisher and run back inside. He put out the fire in a matter of seconds and proceeded to evacuate the building until the fire department could arrive. The client responsible for the fire was schizophrenic and prone to bouts of forgetfulness. He had begun cooking a meal with oil, but was distracted by an emotional call from his girlfriend and forgot the stove was on. When he returned from the bedroom after 45 minutes on the phone, he noticed the stove had caught fire. The fire wound up causing \$10,000 in property damage, but, thankfully, there was no injury or loss of life. **Had the staff not responded with speed and proper protocol, the result could have been tragic.***

Prior to the Nashua Street fire, The Providence Center had a comprehensive, JCAHO-approved fire safety program. All agency staff were educated on fire safety upon hire and were subject to regular fire drills. Staff at greater risk for experiencing a fire - those working with clients in group homes, transitional housing programs and supervised apartments - received eight hours of fire safety training per year. In addition, following routine fire drills, staff would gather as a group to evaluate the evacuation process, document the event and discuss any issues that arose (e.g., a client unwilling to leave the building when the alarm went off, a slow evacuation, staff response to the alarm, etc.). A Hazard Vulnerability Analysis performed by the organization's Life and Building Committee one month before the fire concluded that TPC had a "low" level of probability for a fire occurrence and a "good" level of fire preparedness. Our training process had prepared the Nashua Street staff for dealing with a crisis of this magnitude, which contributed to the individual's tremendous response in the face of what could have been a terrible tragedy.

**Assessing and Addressing Risk:** Following the fire, TPC management and staff involved in the Nashua Street fire performed a root cause analysis and issued a report. This report highlighted TPC's strong response plan and identified the weaker areas of our fire safety plan and staff training program. On the upside, the root cause analysis identified that "it was evident that without the staff person's quick response there could have been a much different outcome. He stated that training had been drilled into him re: fire safety, evacuation, etc., and he felt his response was a result of that." However, although this analysis concluded that staff was well-trained on what to do in the event of fire (putting out the fire, evacuating the building, notifying emergency personnel, etc.), there was an important missing piece - client fire safety assessment and education. Although well-versed on fire drill protocol, mentally ill clients living in TPC group homes were not being assessed for cooking and smoking safety nor being educated on how to prevent fires while using the stove. In addition, in cases where clients might have posed a fire risk (e.g., those tending to be forgetful performing daily living tasks or not disposing safely of lit cigarettes), there wasn't a plan in place to supervise them. These missing pieces were found to be contributing factors in the Nashua Street fire and identified as areas for improvement.

The root cause analysis recommended steps to identifying potential hazards that included:

- Screening clients for their level of safety around potentially hazardous equipment;
- More frequently training staff and clients on fire prevention and reaction;

- Establishing an education and supervision plan for clients who have been identified as having unsafe cooking habits or are prone to distraction;
- Assessing all properties for the presence of potential fire hazards; and
- Installing new smoke and carbon monoxide detectors.

**Novel Fire Prevention Tools:** This analysis inspired The Providence Center to develop and implement novel tools to ensure client and staff safety, reduce our exposure to liability and increase the quality of client care. TPC created a client safety assessment tool that is now performed with all existing and new persistently mentally ill clients living in our housing programs. This tool involves the following assessments:

- A check of the client's stove area to determine the presence of unsafe objects;
- A discussion with client about the importance of a clean stove and cooking area;
- An observation of the client's cooking to gauge their food preparation habits;
- A hands-on quiz on safe ways to put out a fire;
- An individual demonstration of proper use of the fire extinguisher; and
- A review of the building's smoking policy, including designated smoking areas, process for cigarette disposal and "do's and don't's" for safe smoking.

The strength of this assessment process is that it allows staff to gauge a client's level of safety and knowledge in a practical, hands-on format, rather than with the use of a more formal, written questionnaire.

Since the development of this tool, both new and existing group home, transitional and independent living program staff - 75 in all - are educated on the use of this tool and the importance of accurately assessing client cooking safety. Supervisors make their staff aware of the risks posed by clients with known proclivities for forgetfulness or unsafe cooking or smoking habits. They carefully teach their employees how to use the assessment tool. When clients are found to pose a fire risk, staff includes a piece in their treatment plan laying out a mandatory staff supervision plan for cooking activities. In cases when this provision has altered an existing client's treatment plan, staff revisits the client's risk after six months and updates the plan if the client shows a greater level of safety with the stove. In the case of the schizophrenic client involved in the fire, staff devised a creative plan for discouraging unsupervised use of the stove.

We have careful organizational oversight of the fire safety training and assessment process. The manager of the Nashua Street program serves as a fire safety leader, training other staff and serving as the expert "on the ground." Our quality improvement director routinely reviews the organization's efforts to spot areas for improvement. In addition, in October of this year, TPC hired a safety specialist to, among other responsibilities, oversee TPC's fire safety training and

assessment process. One of the specialist's roles is to ensure that The Providence Center is in compliance with new state fire codes implemented following the tragic Station Nightclub Fire in West Warwick, Rhode Island, in 2003, an event that killed 100 people and injured more than 200.

**Reducing Organizational Risk:** The implementation of these policies and protocols will increase our chances for preventing future significant loss of life and property. Increased training hours for staff, coupled with hands-on assessment and training for clients, keeps fire prevention more in the forefront in client treatment plans and staff concerns. With clients now an active part of the prevention process, we are addressing the root cause of fire - clients' unsafe use of smoking materials and stoves - instead of simply the result. Since these new procedures have been put in place, TPC has not had a fire occurrence in any of our housing programs. The client responsible for the fire earlier in the year has been cooking safely since that time, without incident. Although the lack of a fire alone does not prove a program's efficacy, our methods and training data leave us confident that our comprehensive program is greatly reducing our exposure to organizational liability and keeping everyone safer.

The resources required to implement this quality improvement initiative were surprisingly few. This process required staff resources to undertake the root cause analysis, develop the assessment tool and training materials, and hold trainings with staff and clients. The program continues to require a commitment of staff resources for ongoing training and oversight and requires staff to spend more time individually with clients. Despite the human costs involved, this program is very cost-effective because all trainings can be performed in-house by employees and the training materials are inexpensive to reproduce.

This program is unique to a behavioral health organization because this field has not traditionally included clients in plans addressing environmental issues. Our fire safety program includes direct action steps for educating clients and developing a safety plan applicable to any housing placement.

**Improving Client Care:** The Providence Center's plan has improved our quality of care - from the perspective of clients and staff - on a number of fronts:

- We have a more comprehensive client treatment plan that addresses environmental risk issues;
- We do a better job of assessing client safety with activities of daily living in supportive housing;
- We empower persistently mentally ill clients to remain as independent as possible in the community, despite potential safety risks; and
- Staff feels more competent assessing client fire

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safety and has a mechanism for ensuring that safety is maintained on a daily basis. (The manager overseeing the Nashua Street program has been told by new employees that they had never been exposed to this level of fire prevention in other positions and that they found the training extremely valuable.)

**Serving as a Model for Others:** At The Providence Center, we continue to strengthen this program and use our expertise to help others. Although we already have a number of staff who have been certified by the Providence Emergency Management Agency as local emergency response team members, we plan to send several more - at no cost to employees - to this program in the coming months. (This program is designed to train and maintain volunteer personnel willing to respond to a local disaster or other emergency.) The addition of our safety specialist in October guarantees that this training program continues to work well and incorporates the use of innovative training tools such as videos. We intend to take our program “on the road” by training other Rhode Island-based behavioral health organizations on our novel program.

This program could readily serve as a national model for fire prevention, as it is easily replicable in a number of ways. It closely follows the traditional clinical process of screening a client to assess risk, educating the client on the issue, and developing plans to move the client to a more positive outcome. This process structure also lends itself to other risk areas faced by behavioral health organizations, including emergency preparedness and spread of infection. Our fire safety training materials and client assessment tool can be used in a variety of client populations and settings. Lastly, this program embraces the values of client independence and empowerment, values universally shared by all visionary organizations. ❖

**Organizational Background:** The Providence Center (TPC) has provided a continuum of behavioral health care services to meet community mental health and substance abuse needs since 1969. TPC is a non-profit, JCAHO-accredited organization created to help adults and children affected by psychiatric illnesses, emotional problems and addictions by providing treatment and supportive services within a community setting. The Providence Center is a recognized leader in improving quality of care while reducing organization liability risk. In 1999 we were recognized by Negley Associates with a second place award for a groundbreaking medical record documentation improvement plan. In 2001 we built on this success by implementing a program to prevent medical record documentation errors. For this program, TPC was awarded a cash prize of \$15,000 by Negley Associates, management company for the Mental Health Risk Retention Group (MHRRG). TPC's CEO is Dale K. Klatzker, PhD. Presenting this paper for award consideration was Sharon Morello, RN, Quality Director. TPC's phone is 401-528-0123.