

RESIDENTIAL OPTIONS OF FLORIDA (ROOF) CONNECTS AFFORDABLE HOUSING AND SERVICE PROVIDERS

FOR PEOPLE WITH DEVELOPMENTAL DISABILITIES

BY SHERYL SOUKUP, PRESIDENT, SOUKUP STRATEGIC SOLUTIONS

Individuals with developmental disabilities (DD), along with their families and advocates, have long grappled with concerns about where they will live. Many life events can trigger a change in living arrangements, including:

- The death, aging or decline in health of a primary caregiver
- An individual with DD’s desire to live more independently as he/she develops new skills and needs less support
- A move from an institution, hospital or other care facility into the community
- A need or desire to be closer to family, friends, employment, services, etc



Robin Millan (left)

For individuals with DD who choose to live outside of a facility or family home, options include group homes and residential communities designed specifically for people with disabilities and their caregivers, as well as rental apartments and homeownership in the community at large. Although a variety of options have been proposed and developed, housing that is affordable, accessible, and inclusive continues to be limited. Moreover, the transition to independent living depends on the timing of housing and supportive service availability. When an individual with DD has developed the skills necessary for independent living, the services needed to support that individual in their own home may not be available. Once services are established and the individual is ready to move, there may not be an appropriate affordable unit available.

In 2013, The Florida Developmental Disabilities Council (FDDC) convened a task force to examine barriers to

affordable and inclusive housing for individuals with DD and to identify solutions. One example of successful independent living comes from Robin Millan, a 43-year-old woman with autism who owns a condo and works at Publix and her local YMCA. Robin and her family decided that she was ready to move out of her family home when she was 28 years old. Two years later, at age 30, Robin moved into her own home with the help of down payment

assistance and a low-interest loan. There were many challenges as she adjusted to living on her own, but she has overcome them with the support of her family, friends, church, and services from the local Agency for Persons with Disabilities. Robin has been living in her condo for 13 years, and she says, “I love my life!”

FDDC has continued the work of the task force by supporting the development of an independent, non-partisan, statewide nonprofit organization dedicated to increasing inclusive housing opportunities for Floridians with developmental disabilities. The organization is Residential Options of Florida, or ROOF, with a mission to empower individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities to successfully obtain and maintain affordable and inclusive housing of their choice. ROOF’s vision is that every community in Florida will have an abundance of housing choices that meet the needs of individuals with DD.

This is particularly important today, since Floridians with developmental disabilities are living longer than ever before, and about one-third live with a caregiver over 60. As the affordable housing community talks about the “Silver Tsunami”, it is important to consider that a wave of individuals with DD who have never left their family home

will soon need a place to live when their family caregiver is no longer able to provide their care.

The Florida legislature has stepped up to the challenge, and their appropriations of funding to the Florida Housing Finance Corporation are supporting the development of approximately 1,800 units of affordable housing for tenants with special needs. Many of these units are specifically set aside for individuals with developmental disabilities. As these units come online, however, we are finding that there is a disconnect between the disability community and the affordable housing community. Although units are available and prioritized for individuals with developmental disabilities, many property managers are not well networked with the agencies who serve this population. In addition, there is a need to connect SHIP administrators and other housing professionals with individuals with DD, their families and the agencies who serve them.

This is where ROOF comes in. ROOF is developing local, regional and statewide networks to help “connect the dots” between the disability community and the affordable housing community. The networks facilitated by ROOF allow private and nonprofit organizations and government entities to learn from each other and work together to increase inclusive housing opportunities for individuals with DD. ROOF is also working to educate Floridians with DD and their families about their options for living in inclusive settings.

The strength of ROOF comes from its many partners. The original task force included representatives from 30 agencies, including Florida Housing Coalition (FHC). Many of those task force members are still involved with ROOF as members of the Advisory Council or Board of Directors. In particular, FHC Technical Assistance Director Gladys Schneider and FHC Board members Jack Humburg and Suzanne Cabrera continue to provide valuable data, expertise and support as ROOF implements solutions for Florida.

If you'd like to learn more about ROOF and affordable housing options for individuals with developmental disabilities, feel free to contact me at Sheryl@SoukupStrategicSolutions.com. [HNN](#)

Sheryl Soukup presented at the 2014 Conference workshop titled “Community Based and Supportive Housing for People with Special Needs”, along with Bob Hebert from Charlotte County Human Services and FHC Technical Assistance Director Gladys Schneider. The presenters discussed how to identify, finance, and arrange supportive services for affordable, independent, community-inclusive housing options for people with developmental disabilities.

