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Citation: White, W. (2016). Increasing the recovery orientation of recovery homes: An Interview with Boyd Pickard. Posted at www.williamwhitepapers.com

Increasing the Recovery Orientation of Recovery Homes An Interview with Boyd Pickard

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Introduction

Recovery residences (also known as recovery homes, sober living facilities, transitional living facilities) have grown exponentially in the United States. Much

of this growth has come from growth of the Oxford House network, people in recovery creating independent recovery home enterprises, and the growth of funding for recovery residences linked to addiction treatment facilities. Growth of these facilities has also been accompanied by increased specialization of recovery residences for such populations as youth, women, mothers with children, people with co-occurring medical or psychiatric disorders, and people re-entering the community from prison, to name just a few. On the negative side, there have been exposés of recovery residences focusing on poorly sited, constructed, and maintained facilities; the lack of recovery orientation within some of the homes, and financial exploitation of recovery home residents.

The growth of recovery residences, increased scientific support for their role in enhancing recovery outcomes, and concerns about quality of care have all sparked increased concerns about how to increase the recovery orientation within recovery residences. I recently (January 2016) had the opportunity to discuss with Boyd Pickard his experience building a strong recovery culture within his homes. Please join us in this engaging conversation.

Background

Bill White: Boyd, perhaps we could start by having you share the story of your journey from personal recovery to recovery house entrepreneur.

Boyd Pickard: Well, the story begins with my recovery. The last time I put a substance in my body was actually April 15, 1987, but it was not until 2008 that I decided to operate a transitional residence. That actually came about because my Pop passed away in 2006 and he left me his house. An investment guy bought the house, and I decided to take the money that I made off of the house that my dad left me and put it into creating a

transitional residence. I had been eyeing certain homes around the Raleigh area. I was specifically looking for a split entry home with an upstairs living room, dining room, kitchen, two bedrooms, and a bath and a downstairs family room, two bedrooms, a laundry room, and bathroom. I actually found one that became my first house.

My motivation in the beginning was really and truly money-oriented. (Laughs). I bought what became a five-man, low density house. My original thought was that I would attract people living in higher density houses who would prefer having a private bedroom, but people have actually come from many different situations. I've had only a few people move into my houses that had lived in another recovery home. I did talk to a guy who was in a transitional house and hired him as a House Manager by giving him a reduced rent. He and I opened that first house in March of 2008. With 20 years of recovery behind me, I wanted to give it a try. And in the beginning, it was a very monetary-oriented operation. What I learned in the first two years was that I didn't want to do it that way.

Enhanced Recovery Orientation

Bill White: How did that motivation shift for you toward building a stronger recovery culture in your houses?

Boyd Pickard: My early role was no more than stopping by to be part of the house meeting and collect the rent; everything else I left to the House Manager. And my admission policy was, "Do you have some money and do you have a pulse?" (laughs). "How long have you been clean? A day? Okay, come on in." Well, I sat down one day after a guy had left one of my houses because of relapse and I charted everybody who'd been in that house. Within a period of two years and three months in a five-man house, twenty people had stayed in and left that house and, of the those twenty, fourteen of them had left for negative reasons, either through relapse, being busted for a crime committed while using, or other negative reasons. Four of those twenty made lateral

moves, meaning they either moved into another recovery house or they moved back home. Out of the twenty people, I had two people who left in the most positive of circumstances in terms of their recovery stability and the housing option they were moving to. Looking at those numbers, I just didn't get a real good feeling off of it, Bill. I wanted a house that was more than just a nice place to live until their next relapse.

I decided I was going to experiment for a year with a different approach. I let go of the Manager and I took over management of the house myself. I decided I was going to hold people accountable to the recovery activity requirements. Now, we had requirements before, but nobody held anyone accountable for them. Accountability is the key. I had no clue whether that new approach would work or not, but I was committed to giving it a try for a year. If it didn't work, my plan was to shut the house down and rent it to a family. The money was not important anymore. What was important was how I felt about the product that I had. And that's when the change came.

I sat everybody down and told them what I was going to do. Two people moved out within 30 days because they didn't want to adhere to the expectation of outside meeting attendance. That was okay because I didn't want people there who don't want to actively work on their recovery. I also started screening people more carefully when they called so I could gauge their degree of motivation for recovery.

Bill White: Describe the basic expectations to which residents were then held accountable?

Boyd Pickard: If they didn't already have them, they were expected to get a sponsor and a home group within 30 days. They were also expected to attend the business meetings of their home group and to volunteer to do some sort of service work such as going early to help set up for meetings and staying late and help clean up. The longer people have in recovery, the more willing they are actually to do such things and understand their purpose. The

newbies have to be encouraged to be involved in such activities. As long as people know what to expect, if I'm really crystal clear on the requirements, before they even walk through the door, then they know what is expected of them and they are more likely to follow through on it.

Bill White: Did your expectations for the length of abstinence change as you tightened admission requirements?

Boyd Pickard: Yes, I have a standard thirty days policy right now. You have to be thirty days without any substance in your body. I made that stipulation because I wanted to avoid somebody relapsing in another recovery home and then calling me up the next day wanting to get into mine. I just said no, but I've gotten to a point where I am primarily taking people with much longer periods of recovery. The short-timers are more intimidated by the expectations of my homes. I now look for men completing their six month commitment at the Fellowship Home or completing the requirements for completing the Healing Transitions program. I do not admit men who do not complete their commitments from these organizations. I support completing commitments.

Bill White: You later started a Step Study process and the use of texting to connect people in your houses. Could you describe those efforts?

Boyd Pickard: In about 2000, I wanted to make the weekly house meeting more recovery focused. What we had been doing was going around the room, myself included, talking about what we had done to support our recovery that week, what kind of problems, if any, we had faced and how we had managed them. Our focus was on how to move from the problem to the solution and in offering each other suggestions. At the time I took over the house meetings, a friend of mine had written these wonderful Steps and Traditions study guides for his NA sponsorship network. So one night, I proposed that we use these guides for discussion in our weekly meetings. This took

the meetings to quite another level. Each week, we would read a Step or Tradition and then discuss the questions posted in the Guide. They would do the assigned reading each week and do the workbook on their own time and then we'd go through the questions and discuss them in our meeting. This brought a new element of recovery into the house; it helped shape an atmosphere of recovery. These days, I tell them, "Look, dude, I'm all about recovery, okay? If you're doing the deal with recovery, I will be patient with you and we can deal with anything that comes down the pike. But you've got to be doing your part in recovery." That's really the way I feel about it now.

Bill White: Now, tell me how the texting works.

Boyd Pickard: I introduced that in late 2013. To stay in my homes, you are now required to text your housemates when you go to a meeting or when you do something recovery-oriented, like talk with your sponsor or go to a convention. I'm included in that, so I text everybody else to let them know what I'm doing that is recovery-oriented. I don't ask these guys to do anything that I don't do except that I do not attend as many meetings as they do per week. We set up a group text on each resident's phone and coach people through group texting if they are not familiar with it. Bill, I did this because most of the guys get up, go to work, come home, take a shower, and go back out to a meeting. A lot of these guys don't really even see their housemates until either the weekend or at the house meeting, and they often had no idea what each other are doing in terms of their recovery support activity. The texting helped connect people within the house more closely and to forge a more cohesive recovery culture. And it adds another element of accountability to the equation. The guys now like it, and I'm not about to change it.

Bill White: I've also heard you talk about the value of having some people in longer recovery within each of the houses.

Boyd Pickard: Yes, I've been real fortunate in that regard. In my first house, I actually had one guy who just moved out two days ago but he had been there for six years. John has the dream of getting involved with some transitional homes, and so he's found some investors and they've rented a couple houses around Raleigh, which I think is great. John and another man, Matt, also in long-term recovery, have been extremely valuable assets in bringing recovery maturity and support for guys coming in with a few weeks or months. I've got one guy in the second house that I bought, Ricky, who's got fourteen years and is an incredibly valuable asset for that home. Ricky loves talking to the younger guys as a way of giving back.

Bill White: That challenges the stereotype that some people have that people are coming straight off the streets into recovery residences. You've got people with substantial periods of recovery stability.

Boyd Pickard: I do. There is definitely a need for places where people can initiate recovery and become part of the recovery community, but lately, I have been looking for folks who are further along in their recovery. I'm also looking for people who are motivated. You've got to have a job. I like people that have their own transportation. Out of the thirteen people, I have only two people who use public transportation and I'm getting ready to rent to another guy who will be using public transportation and his friends to go to meetings. I like to have a mix of recovery time in each house. If there are enough strong people in a house to help them along, then I'll take a person with less recovery time.

Bill White: What is your policy or response to any alcohol or drug use by individuals in the homes?

Boyd Pickard: If somebody uses or drinks, they have to leave the house. It is a definite termination of privileges there at the house. Now, you have the right to re-apply after 30 days, and we have had two situations before where the person came to us and said that

they had drank. It wasn't that I caught them; they came and brought it to the table, and, because of their honesty with that situation, we actually ask them to move out for two weeks and that if they wanted to move back in, they could. Both of them eagerly wanted to do that. I looked at it this way: if you're honest enough to bring this to the table, we'll work with you. The house was the one who voted to amend that particular rule. It's been a long time since I have had someone leave one of my houses due to relapse. I do have random drug tests that I use when I notice behavior that is not recovery-oriented. But, the guys I have are great, and you can tell when things are amiss.

Bill White: What is your policy or philosophy on length of stay?

Boyd Pickard: I'm still kind of developing that. Originally, I didn't have to worry about length of stay because everybody was running through pretty quickly. But I've got John who just moved out; he was my long-term guy. He had been there for six years and then my next long-term person is Matt right now who's coming up on three years. There's a part of me, Bill, that thinks two years is an ideal time period. Most folks by then will get into a situation where they will have improved their earning power and can afford a better place. But I've recognized that there is a need for a nice, safe place to live without any length of stay restrictions so I have not made any official policy on length of stay.

Community Relationships

Bill White: Boyd, you mention Healing Transitions. When you move toward this increased recovery-orientation, did the relationship with local treatment providers like Healing Transitions or Recovery Communities change?

Boyd Pickard: It really did, Bill. I started actively seeking clients from the Healing Transitions. I got in touch with the Transitional Coordinators there and invited them over to take a look at the houses Mrs.

Barbee came by and viewed the houses and the policies. I was later invited to do a presentation for people that are getting ready to transition out to let them know about the facilities that I have. I also got involved with the Fellowship Home of Raleigh, which has a limited six-month minimum stay, and talked to the Director about how my homes could be a resource for some of his clients. He also invited me to come over and do a presentation, and I have done two presentations to date. My houses are much more closely connected to these other programs today.

Current Status of the Homes

Bill White: Could you review how many homes you have and the current capacity of each?

Boyd Pickard: Sure. I still have very low density homes. I have two homes that have five single bedrooms in them. Everybody has a single private bedroom and these five-man houses will remain only at that capacity. And I have another rental house that I have turned into a recovery home that is a three-person house.

Bill White: How would you describe the neighborhoods in which your homes are located?

Boyd Pickard: Both of the neighborhoods are mixed ethnically, with a mix of permanent residents and rental houses. They are transitional but safe neighborhoods, and you won't see anybody slinging dope on the corner. I've got two of my houses side by side in a neighborhood of Caucasians, African-Americans, and Latinos. We have had very good relationships with our neighbors.

Bill White: Did you run into any local zoning problems or NIMBY issues when you first selected those sites?

Boyd Pickard: I have not. In Raleigh, North Carolina, any housing with over four people unrelated by blood requires a Supportive

Housing Residence Permit. It requires paying a large initial fee and complying with certain standards. For example, there cannot be another supporting housing residence within 375 yards or a thousand feet and you have to provide off-street parking, which I've done on all my residences as part of the improvements I've done to the properties.

Bill White: Boyd, were there any other state licensing or other regulation issues that you had to address when you opened the homes?

Boyd Pickard: No, and I've talked with other people that are in this same business and none of them have faced any federal or state licensing issues. There have been some legal challenges in North Carolina based on accusation that homes were housing more people than allowed, but both cases I am aware of were judged in favor of the recovery homes.

Bill White: How would you describe the rent arrangements with the people who stay in your homes?

Boyd Pickard: Well, I rent by the week, Bill, and I also have a \$100 non-refundable deposit which is really an admission fee. I work with people on that if they don't have it so they can pay me \$20-25 a week until they've paid it. But I expect the rent in advance. I collect rent the night of the house meeting, and you pay for your room in advance. In one of my houses, I actually have three guys who pay me by the month. For instance, if you pay by the month, there are four months out of the year where there'll be five weeks payments, so those guys actually will pay more for those months. All the rest of the guys pay once a week. I pay for all the utilities and I also pay for lawn service. They have chores on the inside of the house, but nothing that they have to do on the house outside. Present rent is \$120-125 dollars a week per person in the five-man houses. Weekly rent in the three-man house is \$130.

Bill White: I'm starting to see advertising for training for recovery home operators. Was any such training available in North Carolina when you started?

Boyd Pickard: No, but I would definitely find it valuable, Bill. I've gone to the National Association of Recovery Residences (NARR) website and downloaded their standard for recovery residences. I think those standards have been a positive step forward.

Closing Reflections

Bill White: As you look back on your experience to date managing recovery residences, what are some of the most important lessons you've learned?

Boyd Pickard: One of the things I learned was that I really didn't need a house manager. What I need is a senior resident who can be a leader. That was one of the big things that I learned. The **other** thing that I learned is the importance of being crystal clear on expectations from the very beginning. I'm very clear on those, and everybody seems to accept those well. The other lesson that I've learned, Bill, is that I learn something from every person who comes and stays in my houses. That has always been the case, and it continues to be. I've learned to always treat these guys with respect and to realize that they're in their own process of recovery. I've also learned that everybody comes in with different skills in life. It is a challenge for me at times to try to meet them where they're at and remember where they're at instead of me having expectations that they should be further along. Since I've changed my philosophy on my primary goal for doing the houses, my goal now is to provide a safe recovery environment. The money that I make off the houses, I now reinvest back into the houses. Meaning that I keep the rooms painted, the exterior painted. I keep up the maintenance. I keep everything running. When I show the house to a potential client, I feel very good about the house. It's a place that I feel good about showing to somebody.

I no longer see the houses as profit centers; I see them as a way I am trying to give back. And I feel real good about that and won't do it any other way.

Bill White: Do you have any suggestions for other recovery home operators who might be open to making that transition toward increased recovery orientation within their homes?

Boyd Pickard: Every home operator can take the recovery activities (meetings, homegroup, sponsor, Step Study, texting) and incorporate any or all of those into their houses. The more recovery activities, the stronger recovery atmosphere. Each home operator will have to make a decision whether they're willing to put the work in to assure accountability for recovery activities. That's the key. I am willing to hold the folks in my homes accountable. Simple as that. (Laughs) I want to put my best foot forward and create an atmosphere that supports recovery. To do that, I'm going to have to set the stage and I'm going to also have to set the example. I've got 28 years clean, these guys still see me at meetings, they know I call my sponsor every week, they know I have a home group, and they know that I am the Treasurer of my home group. They also know I do the NA history stuff. So, they see me involved in recovery. They see me around town. I see them. What I would tell other people, Bill, is to take whatever expectations you set and make everybody accountable for meeting those expectations. In my houses, they know upfront that I reserve the right to give somebody a two-week notice if I don't feel like it's a good fit. They know this coming in and they're reminded of it every now and then. You're not going to get perfect attendance all the time if that's a set expectation. If somebody misses the expected number of meetings one week, that's not a big deal, but it's what they do the next week that's then important. If I see the pattern starting to change, I'll remind someone we agreed upon four meetings, but here's what you're doing and I need you to step it up. If you don't, then maybe this is just not the place for you. It's

as simple of that. What has worked for me is gentle accountability. Once I changed from being a money driven landlord to focusing on creating a safe, recovery-oriented culture, the amazing thing that's happened is that the houses have stayed full (laughs). Recovery is also good business.

Bill White: Boyd, thanks for taking this time to share your experience with your houses.

Boyd Pickard: Thank you, Bill, it's been a pleasure.

Acknowledgement: Support for this interview series is provided by the Great Lakes Addiction Technology Transfer Center (ATTC) through a cooperative agreement from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) Center for Substance Abuse Treatment (CSAT). The opinions expressed herein are the view of the authors and do not reflect the official position of the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS), SAMHSA, or CSAT.