
12 Years Providing Autism Housing, 10 Lessons Learned

Jill Escher

Claradon Properties, LLC

San Jose, CA

jill.escher@gmail.com

1. It is substantially more difficult to serve adults with **severe behaviors** than adults without. In addition, they face a **high risk for eviction** because they are more prone to violate terms of a lease (eg, property destruction, interference with quiet enjoyment, timely payment of rent). While a landlord has the obligation to provide reasonable accommodations (even for disruptive behaviors), this is a limited obligation. We bend over backwards, most landlords don't.
2. HUD **Housing Choice Vouchers** can provide a powerful way for low-income autistic adults to access community-based housing, but often waitlists make them unattainable, and many landlords will not accept them. Housing Authorities however can prioritize HCVs for those at risk of institutionalization (which represents most of our DD tenants).
3. Adults with autism are typically not just low-income, they are **extremely low-income** (usually about \$900/month of SSI). This bars eligibility for much low-income community housing. Carve-outs must be made specifically for the DD extremely low income population.
4. **Design elements** can matter a great deal for the severely autistic: open space, separation from neighbors (when noise is an issue), sensory amenities like swings and pools, damage-resistant materials, lockable gates, and open floorplans often starkly improve quality of life.
5. **Scattered site housing** (the model we follow) can be a welcome and appropriate option for many, but for others painfully boring and isolating. In our experience DD tenants with severe impairments have almost no interaction with typical neighbors.
6. **Separating property ownership/tenancy from service provision**, as preferred by HCBS rules, can work only if there are strong, well-funded supported living agencies available.
7. For adults with **strong independent living skills** (can clean/cook/bathe/dress/shop for selves, manage finances, take public transit/drive), a **dorm-like setup** can be ideal, with a paid staff to check on clients and coordinate activities. Ordinary tenants called on to assist an autistic tenant (eg, a meltdown due to trouble doing laundry) grow alarmed, angry and resentful.
8. Bricks-and-mortar housing, while very costly in markets like the SF Bay Area, pales in comparison to the **much higher costs for 24/7 care**. Discussion of housing must always be coupled with realistic understanding of the service needs and costs.
9. The key to success is a **sustainable public/private business model**. The politico-financial models today are inadequate—to expand capacity we **need a dramatic update** that strongly favors new forms of DD housing, through private landlords and nonprofits, that can serve **all income levels**. **This must include strong empowerment of parents and nonprofits to create new solutions.**
10. In reality, most autistic adults will **remain home with caregiver parents** for many decades. Perhaps nothing is more important than **ramping up supports in the family home**.

In sum, autism/DD housing does not occur naturally. Every step must be thoughtful, intentional.