

# *Oxford House, Inc.*

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May 7, 2015

Senator Will Longwitz  
Mississippi Senate, 25<sup>th</sup> District  
Hinds and Madison Counties  
Post Office Box 1018  
Jackson, Mississippi 39215-1018

Dear Senator Longwitz,

Thank you for posting your May 4<sup>th</sup> letter to the Director of the Mississippi Department of Mental Health. I understand your concerns and applaud your representation of your District. As a fellow Republican, I suspect that you and I share views on most subjects.

I am sure you would agree that there is a prevalent drug and alcohol problem in Mississippi as is the case in most states. You probably have constituents or close friends or co-workers who have experienced alcoholism or drug addiction. I expect you would agree with me that we all want persons with drug and alcohol problems to address those problems in the best way possible and go on to become responsible, productive members of society. That is exactly what occurs in Oxford House.

As you know, I am a very fortunate alcoholic with 40 years of sobriety and good fortune. My wife and I, after having been divorced for 13 years, got remarried in 1988 and have been happily married ever since. I wish there were a magic wand that would give every drug addict and alcoholic the same happy outcome.

As the founder and CEO of Oxford House, Inc., I want to try to allay some of your concerns about Oxford House and clear up some apparent misconceptions you seem to have about the Oxford House program. I appreciate the fact that you have undertaken considerable research into the program; however, I'm not sure that you fully understand why we operate as we do or recognize the success that we have achieved over forty years. The most important contributor to that success is the fact that the Oxford House program empowers Oxford House residents themselves to work together to foster their own recovery and allows them to do so at their own pace.

All Oxford Houses are self-run and self-supported. There are only three absolute rules in an Oxford House and those are the Charter conditions: (1) the House be run democratically by its residents; (2) each resident must pay his or her own equal share of House expenses (including rent); and (3) the group must immediately expel any resident who relapses and

uses alcohol or illicit drugs. Each Oxford House is autonomous and each House is run by its residents. Residents may live in an Oxford House as long as they want so long as they abide by the Charter conditions.

Over the years, Oxford House has provided many suggestions regarding what to look for in a house, where houses should be located, and the like. This guidance is based on what has worked well in the past but they are not fixed rules; they are simply suggestions and some have changed over time.

There is no staff in an Oxford House; the residents themselves run their House. Outreach workers – all of whom are in recovery and have lived in an Oxford House – are available as explain the system of operations to residents, answer their questions and make suggestions but they are not house managers and they have no say in House decisions. They may attend House meetings as observers and resource persons as residents are learning the system of operations but the residents themselves are the only ones who vote on House matters. They teach Oxford House residents how to create and organize local chapters to monitor each other and sponsor social events. Outreach workers also help residents open new Oxford Houses and they provide information to treatment providers, reentry programs and other programs about the Oxford House program, how it works, what the application process is and where vacancies exist.

Let me explain a little about how the system of operations came about. After several years as Republican Counsel to the U. S. Senate Commerce Committee, I left the Hill and began drinking full-time. My wife of 15 years threw me out and I ended up in a psych ward, then in a County-run halfway house. When the County decided to close the halfway house for budgetary reasons, those of us in the house were concerned because most of the prior residents who had left at the end of their allotted time had relapsed shortly after leaving. We decided to rent the facility ourselves but knew we couldn't afford to pay the House manager, the cook or the counselor so we had to figure out a way to run it ourselves. What we decided on still works today.

We agreed that we should share all House expenses and run the House democratically. I recalled the Vermont town meetings of my youth and the pride all residents took in being part of participatory democracy. We also knew that protecting our own sobriety was paramount so we agreed that we would immediately throw out anyone who relapsed. Once the first resident relapsed and we threw him out, we knew that we had a system that worked. As more people in the treatment and 12-step communities saw what we were doing, applications for entry increased and, since we had no vacancies and no time limits on how long an individual could stay in a house, we knew we had to open more Oxford Houses. We opened a few more and they were soon filled and working well.

Expansion then became a problem. As demand grew we had a hard time pulling together the money needed to lend to new groups to cover their start-up expenses (first month rent and security deposit). By that time I was back on the Hill as Republican Counsel to House

Energy and Commerce Committee. When I was hired on the House side, I acknowledged that I was an alcoholic in recovery and agreed that I would be fired if I relapsed. I was never anonymous about my alcoholism and many on the Hill soon also learned about Oxford House.

When President Reagan learned of Oxford House toward the end of his Presidency he immediately asked: “Does Nancy know about this program?” She soon did. In August 1988, the White House sent its leading addiction specialist to visit one of the then-13 Oxford Houses to see firsthand what it was and how it worked. Dr. Ian MacDonald asked the men in that Oxford House when they had had their last vacancy. They told him that had been in March and 23 individuals had applied for admission but they could only accept one man because they had only one vacancy. When asked why they did not rent another house to expand the number of beds, the men replied that it took them about 2 years to save \$5,000, which was the amount they needed to rent and start another Oxford House in that neighborhood. He asked them if they would be willing to borrow the money if a federal loan fund were available. They thought that would work.

That meeting ultimately led to enactment of §2036 of PL 100-690, which mandated that every state establish a \$100,000 revolving loan fund. The loan fund is no longer mandatory but some states have established the funds. Under then-Governor Perry’s leadership, the Texas legislature earmarked money for the statewide development of a strong network of Oxford Houses and there are now 145 Oxford Houses across Texas. North Carolina, under Governor Jim Martin – and with encouragement from former Senator Jim Broyhill – supported an Oxford House development program and now there are 189 Oxford Houses in the state. Virginia, Delaware, New Jersey, Washington, Oklahoma, Louisiana, Oregon and many other states also have strong networks of Oxford Houses.

The Oxford House network has grown to more than 1,800 houses. More than 350,000 people have lived in Oxford Houses since its inception and most have remained clean and sober. Much research – both in-house and by independent academics – has examined the program and its effects. The Oxford House program is listed as a best practice on the Federal government’s National Registry of Evidence-based Programs and Practices (NREPP).

Today, there are more than 13,000 individuals living in Oxford Houses across the country. Who are these people? Overall, they share the fact that they are individuals who have become addicted to alcohol and/or illicit drugs and are seeking recovery from their addiction. Beyond that, they are a very diverse group and differ considerably – in race, age, income level, educational attainment and other attributes. By their living together successfully, Oxford House residents have much to teach the rest of society.

Each Oxford House resident has to pay his or her own share of House expenses so it is important that each resident has a source of income. Oxford House residents – in their

Houses and in their Chapters – develop informal job networks that help newcomers who may have no job experience get jobs. Most residents know of available entry-level jobs; the sort of knowledge that probably isn't available in the neighborhoods or among the peer groups where many residents formerly lived. In Oxford Houses, residents get jobs and many go on to complete or further their education. While building comfortable sobriety, Oxford House living also trains residents to be responsible citizens.

Many residents have served some jail time; for many residents, that amounted to no more than an overnight stay, while others have served much longer terms. One fact is clear: individuals who have the opportunity to get into an Oxford House from a prison re-entry program have a much better chance of remaining both sober and crime-free than if they return to their old haunts where they are more likely to revert to old habits and end up back in the correctional system. As a society, we need to recognize that the current recycling of addicts into and out of the correctional system doesn't work – for them or for society. We can do better and Oxford House is one group that is leading the way.

Have there been problems in Oxford Houses over the years? Of course. Not all residents succeed in achieving comfortable sobriety though most do. Some residents have committed crimes – but these are uncommon occurrences. Overall, in any community it would not be surprising to find that there were more crimes (reported or unreported) committed by their neighbors than by Oxford House residents themselves.

Not all neighbors have welcomed Oxford House initially but, over time, most neighbors have accepted Oxford House residents as good neighbors and assets to the community. Some neighbors would prefer that they be consulted prior to the opening of an Oxford House in their neighborhood but it doesn't work that way. Ordinary families don't ask permission of neighbors before moving into a rented house and, under the law, Oxford House residents are treated the same. As much as we might like to, we rarely, if ever, get the opportunity to vet our neighbors.

You have suggested that the system would work better if there were rules such as at the McCoy House in Jackson where there is supervision and where residents must submit to random drug testing, have a minimum duration of sobriety before entering, and attend 12-step meeting. It appears that this is a 90-day program and it may be very successful. Some Oxford House residents enter Oxford House after completing more structured programs such as are provided to the women in McCoy House because they feel the need for the continuing support that can come from living with others in recovery. As more Oxford Houses are created in Mississippi, some McCoy House graduates may choose to continue their recovery in an Oxford House.

We know that imposing similar rules on Oxford House residents would be counterproductive. Most Oxford House residents do attend numerous 12-step meetings but they do so because they choose to do so, not because they are required to do so. Most

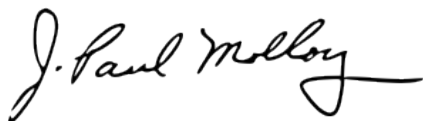
residents have been sober for a while prior to entering Oxford Houses but there are no rules on the required length of sobriety. Furthermore, Oxford House residents know about addiction and have no trouble determining if a fellow resident has relapsed. With regard to supervision, it is our belief that the type of supervision you envision would create both a 'them/us' situation between the residents and the supervisor/s and reduce the residents' responsibility to run the House. Additionally, supervised housing is expensive; few Oxford House residents could afford the \$5,000 commitment required for admission to McCoy House for 90 days. Fortunately, Oxford Houses provide the affordable alternative that has proved the test of time in achieving long-term sobriety for its residents.

Why does the program work? The program works because the Oxford House residents themselves take responsibility for their own recovery. They interview applicants and determine whether they have the capacity and desire to be Oxford House residents; they elect officers (with term limits to avoid bossism) and learn that they are capable of holding leadership positions; they hold structured weekly House meetings; they convene special House meetings when they suspect a resident may have relapsed and, as appropriate, expel that member. Residents take pride in their accomplishments and each day they built stronger sobriety. The program also works because there are no time limits on length of residency; people achieve comfortable sobriety at different paces. The low-cost of operating and opening Oxford Houses permits this open-ended residency.

Oxford House residents also believe that living clean and sober has got to be fun or else it won't be maintained. To that end, Oxford House residents socialize together, create chapters and chapter events; attend State association gatherings. Furthermore, many residents plan to attend the annual Oxford House convention. It will be held this year over Labor Day weekend in Washington, D. C. About a thousand Oxford House residents and alumni are expected to attend this annual event to learn more about addiction, to participate in breakout sessions, to network with residents from other states, and to socialize. It's a great event and we hope many residents from Mississippi Oxford Houses will plan to attend this year's convention. We would also welcome your attendance. You'd get to meet Oxford House residents and alumni and hear many good presentations.

If you have any further questions about the Oxford House program or development within the state, please contact me.

Sincerely yours,



J. Paul Molloy  
Co-founder and CEO  
Oxford House, Inc.

CC

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