

# Clubhouse supports those with mental illness

**Dave Zuchowski For the Herald-Standard | Posted: Sunday, October 9, 2005 4:00 am**

Tucked away almost inconspicuously in the Westland Shopping Plaza on Route 40 between the Holiday Inn and the Hampton Inn, Union Station Clubhouse looks like many other strip mall tenants, but its somewhat commonplace appearance belies its vital community service. Once inside the door, visitors are greeted by a receptionist, just like in any other office. Straight ahead, cubicles stocked with computers, a clerical area to the left that holds the requisite phones, filing cabinets and copy machine, and the dining area to the right are sights right out of corporate America.

It's only when you notice the soft rock music of station WVAQ gently filling the room and the interesting if somewhat unschooled artwork hanging on the walls that you begin to notice differences in the business-like ambience.

Similar to approximately 350 other clubhouses around the world, the Union Station Clubhouse is modeled after the original Fountain House, founded in New York City in 1948 by former psychiatric patients who began to meet informally as a sort of "club." From there, the clubhouse concept spread internationally as a support system for people living with mental illness.

"Here, in Fayette County, former mental patients saw the need for a clubhouse of their own and addressed their need to the county's Mental Health/Mental Retardation program officials," said Elaine Swaney, director of vocational services for Goodwill of Fayette County, which oversees the program.

In response to their need, the county put out a RFP (Request for Proposal) for the development of a clubhouse in January 2001. Six months later, Goodwill Industries was chosen to implement and oversee the program. After locating a suitable building, Union Station Clubhouse opened in January 2002 with just a few members, joining ranks with 26 other clubhouses in Pennsylvania. Since then, membership has grown to 25 active members, all of whom reside in Fayette County.

"Because the Uniontown area had a rich railroad presence and because consumers [members] would be stopping here as a station on the road to recovery, they chose the name Union Station with the train as our symbol," said William O'Flaherty, program director.

Membership is open to anyone with a history of mental illness who is viewed as a valued participant. Members are given the message that they are welcomed, wanted, needed and expected to participate in the daily activities of the Clubhouse, which are organized around a structured system known as the work-ordered day. Members and staff work side-by-side as colleagues to

carry on the work important to the community, and members volunteer to participate as they feel ready and according to their individual needs.

"Our focus here is on the work-order day, and everyone participates to make the organization run smoothly by doing tasks such as giving tours, preparing food, cleaning the facility clean, writing the monthly newsletter and answering the phone," said O'Flaherty. "Each morning, we have a meeting to determine what needs to be done."

The Clubhouse philosophy eschews an organizational hierarchy and encourages equality of members and staff. As program director, for instance, O'Flaherty may wash the dishes in the kitchen one day and clean the bathrooms the next.

"The idea is to have staff and members work side by side as equal partners," he said.

The Clubhouse operates with four full-time staff positions, three staff generalists and program director, O'Flaherty, who has a master's degree from Appalachian State University in Boone, N.C., and is also a National Certified Counselor and a Certified Psychiatric Rehabilitation Professional (CPRP). Swaney, who provides technical support, has a master's degree in education and is also a CPRP.

A staff generalist, Tammy Frazee of Uniontown, is in charge of the food service unit, which prepares breakfast and lunch daily. Cost to the members is 60 cents to \$1.20 for breakfast and \$1.20 lunch, which, on a typical day, might include a grilled ham and cheese sandwich, tomato soup, pudding and tea.

"My duties include buying the food, storing it, preparing it and making up the menus," said Frazee, who's worked at the position for the past year and a half.

The Clubhouse has two Transitional Employment positions - a receptionist and a food service worker - employed part-time away from the Clubhouse. The workers are paid minimum wage and usually work from 9 a.m. to 12:30 p.m. These part-time positions are only temporary and last six months so that other members will have an opportunity to gain work experience.

One regular clubhouse attendee, David Dunn, 46, tries to visit about twice a week where he works in the food and clerical units. Some days, he'll answer the phones, man the reception desk, and take visitors on tours of the Clubhouse. Stops on his tours include the Education Room, where members can use a VCR or practice on two electric typewriters, and the library, stocked with hundreds of books categorized by subject.

"Members can take the books home," said Dunn, who's reading "Success With Words," published by the "Reader's Digest."

A resident of Brownsville, Dunn claims his mental problems began in 1977, when he was involved in the recovery effort after a

Johnstown flood.

Working in a basement full of debris and mud, he said he came into contact with an electric wire that struck him in the head and knocked him down.

"I went through many hospitalizations," he said. "I worked hard to get to the point I'm now at and visit a psychiatrist at least once a month. My medication also helps keep me steady, focused and working toward my ultimate goals, which are outside employment and independence."

Dunn travels to and from the clubhouse on one of the organization's two vans, which also provides transportation to close to 95 percent of the members. Driven by a staff person, the van starts out from the Clubhouse each morning at 6:30 a.m., with the earliest pickup at 6:45 a.m.

"I like coming to the Clubhouse," said Dunn, "Instead of remaining isolated at home, it gives me the chance to mingle with others who deal with many of the same issues. I've also made a lot of good friends by coming to the Clubhouse."

Another Clubhouse regular, Mike Klosinski, 37, of Masontown, said he's been mentally ill his entire life with a diagnosis of intermittent explosive disorder and depression.

For the past four years, Klosinski has been visiting the Clubhouse twice a week doing janitorial and production work.

"I like my job and the people I work with," he said. "The Clubhouse gets me out of the house and gives me the chance to learn new things. Right now, my biggest goal is learning to control my temper. Eventually, I hope to get off medication so I can get a driver's license."

In their free time, members can congregate in the lounge area to watch DVDs, listen to speakers and hold discussions. In the corner, a Christmas-like Celebration Tree decorated with hand-made ornaments is kept up year round. Dunn said it's called a Celebration Tree because "members are glad to have a place they can return to and make friends."

Throughout the month, Union Station Clubhouse also sponsors several special events that take the members to places like the Fayette County Fair, matinee movies, Idlewild Park, Pirate ballgames and dinner outings at local restaurants.

"You might say we're almost a well-kept secret," said O'Flaherty. "Although we do quite a bit for our consumer base, a lot of potential Fayette County members still don't know we exist."

On October 21, the Union Station Clubhouse, located at 690 W. Main St. in Uniontown, will hold a public open house noon until 2 p.m. Light refreshments will be served and visitors will get a tour. For more information, phone 724-439-9311.

