

A Window into the Work of River Haven

Over the past two years as I served as a mentor to one of the many clients in River Haven's Independent Living program I learned a tremendous amount about both the challenges faced by River Haven clientele and the knowledge and resourcefulness of the Hudson River Housing staff. Working with a young single mother (I'll refer to her as "Jane") who had no family support, I was astounded at the number of everyday things that those of us who are part of intact families take for granted. Among the many problems that River Haven helped Jane with was obtaining a photo ID. Obtaining a photo ID is NOT the simple process we are led to believe. For a non-driver's ID from Motor Vehicles she would need an official copy of her birth certificate and various other documents as "proof of name." Jane was born in another state and, of course, did not have even a copy of her birth certificate. Her River Haven caseworker obtained the information required by the other state, certified Jane's identity, and paid the fee so that Jane could get an official copy of her birth certificate – a process that took more than six weeks. Next up were 6 points worth of documents acceptable as "proof of name". From the lengthy list of acceptable documents we could only laugh at several (NYS Professional license, NYS Registration Document [Vehicle or Boat only], NYS Certificate of Title). Somehow Jane had her Social Security card (2 points) and her GED (1 point). Thanks to the staff at River Haven, she had a Medicaid card (without photo = 2 points) and I sent her a letter so that she would have a post-marked envelope (1 point). Accumulating the documents took an additional few weeks, and then we had find a time and transport to get her to the DMV office. Even with significant help from two adults dedicated to helping it took more than two months for Jane to get her official photo ID; I think of this each time I read about photo ID requirements for voting.

There are many other stories from those two years, including the struggle to get a prescription for heart medication filled when she had only the old kind of Medicaid card (at that time there was one pharmacy in the area where they could still honor the "old" type of card); transportation to food banks (with the appropriate ID, during the right hours); assistance in getting Social Security Disability; finding social services support for her child; finding clothing for her child; transporting her to counseling appointments and caring for her child while she was with the psychologist; finding her a place to live where she would no longer be subject to psychological abuse from her child's paternal grandfather; getting her a land line phone so she could call 911 in an emergency (a 911 call can be made even from an out-of-service land line). The list is very long, and much of the time a River Haven caseworker or intern provided the necessary transportation. I found the staff at Hudson River Housing to be consistently kind, helpful, friendly, welcoming, knowledgeable and resourceful, even as the number of caseworkers was cut due to budget constraints.

For me, the experience was rewarding, frustrating, and educational. The rewards came from the small successes. The frustrations resulted from the frequency with which crises emerged, reversing progress Jane had already made. The education was many-

fold. I was sobered by the vast range of things that we who are privileged take for granted. My greatest insight came from realizing that it takes all of Jane's resources just to survive, and my hopes for getting her into community college remain unfulfilled. This is tragic because she is a bright, responsible, empathic person who has great potential. That being said, without the aid of Hudson River Housing, I cannot imagine what sort of life Jane would be leading.