Twelve Lessons from the Development and Operation of an Australian Accommodation Support System for Deafblind Adults

Trish Wetton CEO, Forsight Foundation for the Deafblind, and Mike Steer from the Royal Institute for Deaf & Blind Children, and the University of Newcastle, NSW give us an introduction to the Foresight principles.

An Australian with sensory and multiple disabilities is a full citizen with the rights and responsibilities accorded all adult Australians, and is entitled to dignity and respect. The Forsight Foundation located at North Rocks in suburban Sydney was founded 30 years ago by parents of children who were deafblind to provide quality accommodation support services and facilitate training and employment for adults who were both deaf and blind with additional disabilities; and to enhance and enrich their lives. In 2008, Forsight manages eight independent group homes, with 35 full-time, part-time and casual staff providing support to 32 adults with sensory and additional disabilities.

Forsight Foundation staff firmly believe that each resident is a unique and important individual. The agency’s Board, staff, the residents, their families and advocates do all in their power to foster a service model that is based on mutual respect. Staff members are trained by the agency to adopt a person-centred approach to all aspects of its Accommodation Support Program. The agency’s objectives are as follows:

- To promote, encourage, foster and develop the care, accommodation, communication and training of adults who are deafblind with additional disabilities.
- To assist residents to interact with others in the community, to protect their rights and treat them with dignity and respect as valued members of the community.
- To assist residents to lead satisfying lives and as far as possible become self-determining.
- To consolidate world knowledge and encourage sponsorship for research.
- To become a model of best practice in the provision of services for adults who are deafblind with additional disabilities.

In its 30 years successful experience at developing and managing a reasonably large accommodation and support system for deafblind adults, Forsight Foundation’s management, staff and residents have learned that the following areas are highly important to the success of the agency:

**Sound principles**

Lesson 1  
*Services need to be based on sound human service policy principles*
Forsight Foundation has developed and implemented policies and procedures including a Code of Conduct, and a Code of Ethics entitled *Meeting Individual Needs and Mutual Respect for Others*. The ecology of each group is a high priority for Forsight Foundation. Nurturing relationships between residents and also between staff, families and Advocates and residents is regarded as highly important by Forsight Foundation management.

Attempts are constantly made to have each Forsight Foundation group home a welcoming, safe and happy home and workplace. All staff members focus on each resident’s needs. The goal is to provide a person-centred service. Communication training in Augmentative and alternative methods of communication include finger-spelling, Makaton and Compic. These are provided to meet individual communication needs.

**Assessment**  
*Lesson 2*  
*Residents with sensory and multiple disabilities need to be correctly needs-assessed.*

Assessments at Forsight Foundation take into account the centrality of sensory and multiple disabilities to the individual resident, and include consideration of the whole person. Assessments require input from the resident with a disability or an advocate, and from family members and carers. The importance of identifying the range of impairments, the way they combine and the resultant effect cannot be over-emphasised. Early identification and complete assessment leads to effective program development and enhances the probability of providing positive outcomes.

Practical Assessments are conducted in each resident’s own group home. Residents are more confident in surroundings and with people they are familiar with. A range of medical and other Assessments are conducted for the Lifestyle & Environment Review, the Developmental Disability Health Unit Care Plan and the Forsight Foundation Care Plans.

**Community presence**  
*Lesson 3*  
*Australians with sensory and multiple disabilities have a right to live and spend their time in the community, and not in facilities that deny their access to fellow citizens.*

Towards this goal, Forsight Foundation constantly seeks alternatives to such long-stay programs as nursing homes and institutions. The location of a support service is highly important as this can affect opportunities for involvement in ordinary, everyday community life. Residential support services need to be located within easy reach of such community facilities as shopping centres, post offices, community health centres, recreational facilities etc. Proximity to public transport is also highly important. In planning and delivering accommodation support services, equal weight should be given to day activity provision and access to community services.
Residents are able to access their local shopping centre with one-to-one support for personal shopping and personal care appointments. Additional one-to-one support is available through the Group Home Support Centre at North Rocks.

Forsight Foundation obtains donations each year to provide support and transport for residents to attend Blind Bowls, Blind Cricket, Riding for the Disabled, RAPS and Hand Over Hand recreational activities in the community. The agency believes that when group homes (including gardens) are well maintained, residents are accepted by their neighbours and welcomed into the local community. Forsight Foundation welcomes local Service Clubs to participate in special events with residents.

**Relationships**

Lesson 4  *Living in the community is not enough. Relationships in daily life with non-disabled people need as much as possible to be fostered*

Forsight Foundation seeks advocates to provide support to residents who do not have family members or friends to assist them to make informed decisions and choices about their lives. Links with Corporate partners allow relationships to be formed between volunteers and residents. Working bees, including group home garden and room makeovers involve community donors-in-kind and residents working side by side on a project.

Professional photographers have become mentors to blind residents, training them to take digital photographs to expand their perception of the world using their senses of touch, sound and smell. New opportunities for building new relationships are continually being sought.

**Choices**

Lesson 5  *A person with a sensory and multiple disabilities has rights of citizenship in the service development process to make views known and have account taken of those views*

Residents attend regular meetings where they receive assistance to communicate their views about their group home. They have a representative on the Forsight Foundation Homes’ Committee which gives them access to the Board. Under guidance from the CEO, a unique communication link with each resident has been developed to enable all residents to make their views known and be listened to at any time.

**Communication**

Lesson 6  *Opportunities for communication with other people is of primary importance in the development of relationships, since this enables choice and decision-making as well as participation in community life.*

Individual Plans include goals for increasing communication skills. Vision Australia, Deafblind Services NSW, Guide Dogs Association of NSW/ACT and the Deaf Society assist the Forsight Foundation to provide opportunities for
residents to communicate with other people in their group home and in the community.

Staff receive training in offering choices to residents, just knowing when to hold back to encourage independence is important to ensure that each resident is given the time he or she requires to make choices about being independent and doing things for him or herself. The agency provides weekly Dance Therapy sessions to residents. Positive outcomes from this project include enhanced communication between residents, enjoyment and documented changes in challenging behaviour.

Families, friends and Advocates play an important role in the lives of deafblind residents. Home visits are anticipated eagerly. These highly important links are nurtured by staff.

Home
Lesson 7 Wherever possible, remaining in the family home with support from the agency should be considered a viable option for a person with a sensory and multiple disabilities.

New enquiries for accommodation support programs are referred to the Department of Ageing, Disability and Home Care Vacancy Management Committee. The Department provides Case Management and Assessment options to identify level of support needs to ensure that all viable options are considered. In-home support services are discussed with stakeholders at Individual Planning meetings.

Forsight Foundation believes that all residents where possible, should go home to their families during Christmas and Easter breaks. Regular home visits are encouraged throughout the year.

Educational/Developmental programs
Lesson 8 There must be a consistent and coherent approach to educational and developmental programming across residential, educational, recreational and vocational or occupational services.

Forsight Foundation requires a comprehensive Transition Plan, Funding Agreement and Health Care Plan that clearly identify the unique current and future needs of each resident seeking to access the service. Adult learning programs and supported employment services are facilitated by the agency and transport to services is provided.

Forsight Foundation staff training includes obtaining Government Certificate IV in Disability Studies and both external and in house training. Competent staff can provide learning opportunities to residents across all programs.

Specialist supports
Lesson 9 These are essential as part of the agency’s comprehensive service provision.
An experienced member of the Forsight Foundation management team attends all appointments at the Developmental Disability Health Unit (DDHU) at Royal Rehabilitation Hospital or attends appointments with any treating Specialist with each resident. This practice ensures continuity and accurate information is provided confidentially. A comprehensive Care Plan is developed by the DDHU and regularly reviewed. A team of specialists is involved in the implementation of each Care Plan. In addition, Forsight Foundation Treatment Plans are developed for all hospital stays and Specialist treatments to record all information.

Clinics are conducted regularly by Westmead Dental Hospital, Dysphagia Clinic, Clinicall and Macquarie University Audiology Clinic for all residents at Forsight Foundation Group Home Support Centre at North Rocks. Clinicians are always pleased to examine residents who are relaxed in their familiar surroundings.

Staff are kept informed of all specialist support arrangements through the Trans-disciplinary team confidential approach using group home computers.

**Comprehensive services**

Lesson 10  Providing comprehensive supports on an individual resident basis requires a planned approach with emphasis on periods of transition between phases, for example, that which occurs on leaving school for adulthood.

All new admissions require an individual planning approach. The Department of Ageing, Disability and Home Care (DADHC) Vacancy Management Committee oversees all placements. A comprehensive DADHC proposal for funding is based on Assessment outcomes and budgetary guidelines. Residents entering the Forsight Foundation from School would receive the same process as do adults who transfer from another adult service, such as an Aged Care Nursing Home, or a DADHC large residential or group home.

The location of family and friends of deafblind residents is taken into account to ensure that relationships can be easily maintained. Day programs and supported employment services, including transport needs are identified.

**Changing needs**

Lesson 11  Program development must take into account the changing needs that arise from; improvements or deterioration of an individual’s condition; on-going developmental opportunities, different life stages; and choices made by the individual resident.

The changing needs of deafblind residents are monitored by the Forsight Foundation management and staff in collaboration with other services, families, Advocates and Guardians. A pro-active approach is used to ensure that early symptoms or deterioration of a resident’s are picked up. The ‘Preventive activities over the Life Cycle’ system provides a guide for
screening for age related illnesses. Screening is firstly identified in the Individual Plan and then included in the DDHU Care Plan.

An accommodation retirement program operates at some group homes for residents who do not attend day programs or supported employment services full-time.

**Staffing**

Lesson 12  *Individuals with sensory and multiple disabilities must have support services provided by staff who are well trained, experienced and who are provided with in-service training and supervision.*

Forsight Foundation is aware that due to the scattered nature of its eight group homes all staff do not work under ‘direct’ supervision but ‘general’ supervision only. To address this isolation and the solo shifts worked at most group homes, Forsight Foundation implements a strict recruitment and induction process to ensure that all staff have the skills required to work with four or five residents alone before being rostered to work at a group home.

Deafblind residents rely heavily on staff to be able to understand them so that they can convey their needs to management. A high level of trust exists between the different levels of staffing. Each staff member receives in-house training in the Life Cycle Model to equip them to become skilled managers at work and in their own life situations. This management training provides staff with the ability to manage critical incidents as they arise and to report them. An Action Planning approach identifies each situation and records actions needed to complete various tasks with a regular evaluation. Every critical incident reported to management is monitored closely until resolved.

The Forsight Foundation trans-disciplinary confidential approach to group home care, using computers with email access in each group home has been developed so that all staff can work as one team. In-house training in documentation and legal responsibility, medication management, epilepsy management, deafblind communication skills, fire evacuation and use of equipment and complaints reporting and handling are continually offered to all staff. Quarterly General Staff meeting/training sessions are attended by both Forsight Foundation and Agency staff.

Forsight Foundation provides VitalCall direct telephone support at each group home. Individual VitalCall medallions are provided to residents as required. 24/7 advocacy is provided to residents and staff by the CEO and the ASM.

A CEO Payroll Memorandum containing valuable information about resident care, group home management and staffing matters is sent out each fortnight with payslips to all staff including Agency staff.

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