

An Empowered Approach to Choosing a Sober House

Addiction and alcoholism have been around since Man first crushed grapes or chewed feel-good leaves. But the current opioid epidemic has made the option of sober living more attractive and more widely available.

The fatal nature of addiction though can set us up in a cycle of desperate and impulsive action.

Choosing a recovery residence can be a first step toward building a new life of rational, well-considered decisions. If we can approach sober home placement as informed and empowered consumers, there is less risk that desperation or impulsivity will cloud our judgment and certainly less risk that the addiction recovery “industry” will take advantage of our vulnerabilities.

Besides, it’s just a fact that sober living home residents will be asked to do things they don’t always want to do – like wash dishes and go to a meeting. Or they’ll be told to not to do things they really want to do – like fall in love after getting to know someone really well in twenty minutes or stay in and watch Netflix rather than go to a [meeting](#). If we encourage people to make deliberate, well-informed decisions when choosing a recovery residence, we help them to take ownership of a process that won’t always feel comfortable.

When we start to investigate sober living options, there is no need to hand the advantage to the operators of alcohol and drug free housing. The booming sober house movement has created a buyer’s market, and, realistically, we hold the advantage if we comparison shop. There are literally *hundreds* of sober living homes throughout New England. Through word of mouth, advertisement, referral, or voluntary sober housing registries, finding a recovery residence isn’t the challenge.

Learning to be an informed consumer is the real challenge.

Here are some tips for how to make rational decisions when shopping for alcohol and drug free housing.

1. Adopt an Attitude of Empowerment

Addiction recovery is a service industry. We are its consumers. Yes, addiction is a chronic disease and yes it has often left us feeling helpless and powerless and quick to defer to professionals. But now, past the acute care stage of treatment, we are no longer the passive client or passive family. We are active consumers and advocates. ALWAYS ask yourself or the recoverer you love how a particular sober house benefits a resident’s recovery. Benefit to the person in recovery – rather than benefit to the person in ownership — should always drive the conversation, the decision making, and the direction you or your family takes in choosing or continuing with a sober house.

2. Do Preliminary Research Online

- With the sober house address in hand, check the Registry of Deeds in the county and state in which the home is located. Is the house in foreclosure? Are there liens on the property?
- Check the state sex offender registry. Are sex offenders registered at that address?
- With the owner's full name at hand, Google the home's management.
- Visit the National Alliance of Recovery Residences [website](#) to find a state affiliate's website. Is the home certified with the state affiliate? Is the operator a member of a [state affiliate](#) organization?
- Does the home have a website? A Facebook page? A Google page?
- If you belong to online support groups, ask the group members for referrals.

3. Interview the Owner/Director, in Person or Over the Phone

- Does your organization have a Mission Statement or Philosophy?
- How would you describe your ideal candidate?
- What recovery pathways do you promote or accommodate? 12-Step? Medication Assisted Recovery? [Refuge Recovery](#)? [Natural Recovery](#)?
- Is there an admissions assessment that gauges readiness for the level of independence allowed at the sober house?
- Does the house have any kind of orientation process?
- Who owns the property and how many other sober houses are owned?
- How is the house staffed? Is staff available to the residents 24/7?
- Do you have written job descriptions for staff that clearly outline the scope of responsibilities?
- How is the house insured?
- What percentage of active management or staff are in recovery?
- (When the person you are interviewing discloses that he/she is in recovery) How have you stayed clean and sober?
- If active management and staff are in recovery, what arrangements have been put in place should management or staff relapse?
- Are drug tests random or scheduled? What is the charge for drug tests? Who is responsible for the expense?
- Do you drug test house managers and staff, regardless of whether or not they are in recovery?
- What is your alcohol and drug free policy? Zero-tolerance or second chances?
- Is there a written policy regarding relapse?

It might feel like overkill to ask if an alcohol and drug free house has a written policy about drug or alcohol use but assume nothing. Sober houses vary widely in their policies and responses to relapse or possession. For instance, a Massachusetts chain of sober homes known as “Gianna’s House” folded and reopened under new management as Gateway House. Same address but widely divergent drug and alcohol policies implemented by the former and current managers.

Tiffany Jonas, former director at Gianna’s House, understands the struggles of recovery; a recovering heroin addict, she first became associated with Gianna’s House when she entered as a

resident in 2009. As program director, Jonas took the approach of giving residents more privileges – such as overnight passes and fewer curfew restrictions – as they made progress, she said. She conducted drug screenings but testing positive for drugs or alcohol did not necessarily mean a resident was thrown out.

“You’re housing a bunch of drug addicts; people are going to relapse,” [Jonas](#) said. “I would do whatever I felt would help them.” She goes on to explain that recovery is a very individualized process, which is hard for people outside the recovery community to understand. She believes relapse is part of the recovery process and throwing someone out for a single misstep could send them on a fatal binge.

On the other hand, with an eye toward community rather than the individual, Corey Pina, Executive Director of what is now Gateway House, runs the houses with a zero-tolerance policy, he said, because it encourages a safe, substance-free environment for everyone.

Regardless of whether the house you are investigating has a “relapse happens” or a “zero-tolerance” policy regarding the use of alcohol and drugs, it still makes sense to ask the following:

- Do you have an ongoing relationship with a medical detox facility and will you help a resident enter detox in the case of relapse?
- Can you provide a written re-entry after relapse policy?
- Is the house equipped with a defibrillator? Are staff trained in CPR? Is the house supplied with naloxone (brand name Narcan)?

4. Questions to ask about the more traditional tenant/landlord arrangement:

- What is the rent? (Make sure you have confirmation on whether the answer is a weekly or monthly figure.)
- Do you require a security deposit? What other fees are required and which are non-refundable? (For example, are there unexpected upfront fees such as a one-time facilities fee, an admissions processing fee, a background check fee?)
- What is your refund policy?
- Is there a rent increase policy or schedule?
- Are utilities included? Is food?
- How is food managed? Who cooks?
- What is the maximum occupancy per bedroom and do changes in bedroom occupancy affect rent?
- Can you provide the ratio of residents to working bathrooms? (If the ratio exceeds 6 residents to a bathroom look elsewhere).
- Is there a minimum, maximum, or suggested length of stay?

Questions to ask about house policies, (which should all be available in writing):

- Does the house have a non-aggression, anti-violence policy?
- What are the visitation policies?

- Does the house allow for overnight passes? For instance, can residents be away overnight to visit with family?
- What is the house policy to encourage a courteous and friendly good neighbor policy.
- Does the house take a position on medication? What policies or restrictions are in place for medication? For example, does the house allow Medication Assisted Recovery (such as methadone maintenance or Suboxone), psychiatric medications, other prescription medication, over-the-counter medications?
- How are house rules documented and distributed? Are they posted?
- What activities are required of residents? What activities are prohibited?

If applicable to your situation:

- Do you take a position on or have policies to address co-occurring disorders? For example, mental illness, PTSD, behavioral addictions such as gambling?
- Does the house have a personal vehicle policy?
- What are your policies regarding communication with family? Is staff available to talk with family?

5. Make a visit to the home

If, after your internet research and interview, you are still interested in a specific home, arrange for an on-site tour of the property. NEVER sign an agreement with a sober house without first visiting the property.

While visual proof is often the most reliable, do not hesitate to ask about what you do not see. Things to look for and questions to ask yourself on-site:

- Does the neighborhood appear to be safe? For instance, is there a liquor store across the street? Often a sober house *is* the safest house in a neighborhood. The surrounding properties shouldn't reflect on a recovery residence; people in early recovery can be inspired by watching their old way of life from the safety of a sober home's front porch. But still, definitely ask about the neighborhood to see what the operator has to say about it.
- Is the house clean and in a good state of repair?
- Do you provide ample common space in which all resident can gather?
- Are emergency procedures posted throughout the house?
- Is there a working smoke detector in every bedroom and on every level?
- Do you see a first aid kit, a carbon monoxide detector, a fire extinguisher, and naloxone?
- Does the house have wifi?
- What are the laundry facilities?

The three quirky investigations:

- Make a cell phone call from the house on the potential tenant's phone. Coverage by cell phone carriers varies widely. A lack of carrier cell coverage at the house means limited communications with family or the expense of a new phone plan.

- Look in the refrigerator. I don't know what you will find there, but a refrigerator can tell you a lot about the community and cooperation within a house. Anything green should be edible. Milk should be dated sometime this year. The temperature controls should be adequate. A six pack of non-alcoholic beer should be cause for concern. The odor of dead fish should get your attention. Don't ask to look in the refrigerator; just do it.
- Who buys the toilet paper? Is there toilet paper?

Just on the Issue of Toilet Paper Alone

Does this list of questions make you feel like you would come across as obsessive? As too pushy? As too picky?

When we are dealing with the addiction recovery industry it is easy slip back into a passive mode and to forget that benefit to the person in recovery – rather than benefit to the person in ownership — should always drive the conversation, the decision making, and the direction that prospective residents and their families take in choosing or continuing with a sober house.

And keep in mind that we're talking about a communal home for early recoverers. Just on the issue of toilet paper alone the established residents have us beat in terms of being pushy, picky, irritating, vocal, and obsessive. If the house management can't handle a visit from a pushy, picky, irritating, obsessive candidate or parent, then the management in this particular sober house lacks the skill to deal full-time with multiple residents in early recovery.

And that's what we really set out to investigate.