

Life with Purpose

By Alexandra Russell

Sweetwater Spectrum in Sonoma is a unique residential community designed for adults with autism. Made up of a quartet of four-bedroom homes and a community center set on three acres in a quiet residential neighborhood, it's an unexpected oasis for a vastly underserved population.

"It was founded by families who came together and decided they wanted something different than what was traditionally offered, such as group homes," explains Deirdre Sheerin, CEO/executive director of Sweetwater. "They went around the country exploring other models and housing options. They conducted focus groups with other people who had children with autism, as far as what their ideas, ambitions and hopes were for their sons and daughters. They knew they wanted someplace where residents could age in place, because one of the greatest worries for families of people with autism is, 'What happens when we're not here anymore?'"

Creating a community

Sweetwater was "designed to consider the sensitivities and challenges faced by people with autism," says Sheerin, including discomfort with many interpersonal interactions, unease at the prospect of unexpected change and hypersensitivity to loud noises, overly bright lights and other jarring sensations. Design elements include wide walkways and lines of sight, so residents can see what's ahead and make predictions and choices before being faced with a situation. Outdoors, structural headways gently signal transitions between spaces. And all four houses and the community center feature muted colors and share a basic blueprint, so even moving from one structure to another holds a familiar feel.

A large community garden and chicken coop offer outdoor work opportunities (a full-time gardener grows microgreens onsite, which the Sweetwater community sells at its seasonal farmstand and delivers fresh to local restaurants). An inground pool was the only feature 100 percent of founding families insisted on, because, says Sheerin, "Water seems to be especially comforting to people with autism."

The community center serves as a gathering place for residents and their aides to socialize, exercise and create. One room holds treadmills and other exercise equipment, an art center is available around the clock, and a community enrichment director plans gatherings like potluck dinners, movie nights and holiday celebrations. "It's often said that people with autism don't do much socializing, but we believe there's opportunity for coming together and being part of a whole community," says Sheerin. "But it's not required. Residents participate at their own comfort level."

It's this type of choice that makes Sweetwater so different. "Our residents choose who they want to live with," explains Sheerin, who has a background in special education and organizational development. "We're also an open-but-gated community, so our residents can come and go as they wish." By encouraging independence and community engagement, she says, residents are "thriving and really defining who they are as individuals."

Establishing support systems

Sweetwater Spectrum doesn't provide any direct support or care to residents. Rather, Sheerin explains, "We're a public/private partnership: We're private housing, but we also work with the public system. In that public system, everyone with a disability gets an assignment of support



Sweetwater Spectrum's community center

depending on his or her needs. We rent to anyone on the autism spectrum, so we have some people who need 24/7 support and others who need much less."

Support staff are employed by vendors who are contracted through the North Bay Regional Center (which is a representative for the California Department of Developmental Services), but because of the nature of the work, the relationship is anything but professionally distant. "They're part of our family," says Sheerin, who's working with other autism-focused organizations to help develop guidelines and tools for working with autistic adults. Calling it "a fast-growing field," she hopes to help standardize training and establish it as a separate professional field.

Sweetwater operates under a Supported Living Services Model, laid out by California code through the Lanterman Act. "It's being able to support a person in his or her own home," says Sheerin. "It's providing the services and the structure necessary to be able to live as independently as possible in the community of their choice. All residents receive SSI, and that's what they pay the rent with. We also have a 'community fee,' which is either paid through donations or by the family." Residents currently range from 19 to 35 years old.

Making a model

According to Sheerin, almost all new developments in autism-related fields—schools, housing, employment—are being driven by families. Sweetwater Spectrum and the Anova Method of Education are two local examples, and both, it seems, have the potential to change the landscape nationally.

Says Sheerin, "We've been given a grant to solidify the practices it took to build this place and to do some evaluating: Did we do the right things? Were our processes efficient?"

"It's a four-phase grant, and we've been funded for the first phase. The second phase is marketing: How do we communicate to other groups what we've done? The founders, from the very beginning, wanted to create a model that could be replicated nationwide."

Sheerin is quick to clarify that, "It's about the culture we're creating. People can get overwhelmed by these beautiful buildings and think they couldn't possibly replicate it, but this kind of community could be created with adjacent houses. It really is about creating choices in housing. We can teach people about the complexities of creating housing for adults with autism even if they're not going to do this big of a project. There's momentum: People are looking for alternatives right now."

Ultimately, she's not just referring to residential alternatives: "Not only do adults with autism need housing choices, they really need meaningful volunteer activities and day programs," she says. "That's what we all want. We're helping them find a life with purpose."

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