

Answer to Peggy Burgess Article Entitled **“Regulate Transient Facilities”**

This is my original answer to the Peggy Burgess article “[Regulate transient facilities](#)”. The Editor told me it was too long so I wrote the articles entitled “[Sober-living homes are hardly identical](#)“. I just wanted to include this here so that those wondering why I did not answer Peggy Burgess will know I tried.

The Time Has Come To Do Something Different

We appear to be making progress against discrimination. This especially stands out with our choice in the new American President-elect. Bigotry, at least on the surface, seems to have taken a step back. It is difficult to imagine any government official who would dare to openly advocate discrimination against the legal rights of any ethnic, sexual, or religious group. However, this does not seem to hold true when it comes to the disabled that live in group homes and particularly to those who are recovering from alcohol and/or drug addiction.

Yes, recovering addicts and alcoholics are considered to be disabled under the American Disabilities Act and have a legal right to live together as protected by the Fair Housing Act. The Government has recognized that certain groups recover quicker and have a better quality of life if they are allowed to live together in a residential neighborhood as a family unit.

Anyway, Friday (11/14/08) I started getting calls from people asking me if I had read the article in the Daily News. I thought they were talking about an article written by Thom Senzee (Sunday 11/9/08) that asked people to give Sober Living Homes a chance. This, however, was not the case I couldn't believe my eyes when I read the bigotry expressed by Peggy Burgess, a member of the neighborhood council as well as the chairman of the ad hoc community planning committee. Apparently, she was so incised that anyone would say something positive about sober living homes (or me) that she felt compelled to write an opinion piece of her own. In her opinion piece, she viciously attacked me, the sober living coalition, sober living homes and the tenants thereof. During the course of her article she described every negative incident ever to happen in sober livings all over California and made it seem as if these were her daily experience. Then she pulled out all the tools that bigots use to spread their fear; the exaggerations, the half-truths, and the outright lies of those who hate.

I do not know Peggy Burgess very well. I first met her at a neighborhood council meeting. I attended the meeting because I had been led to believe that the council was interested in passing legislation to help sober living homes be more effective. I know

there are a lot of problem houses out there that are passing themselves off as sober living homes when they are not. These places hurt what the legitimate people in recovery are trying to do.

In her article, Peggy claims to know all about me and what I do. She tried to villainize me by pointing out that I admitted that I had spent 27 years in prison and that I was an ex-convict. Peggy seems to have missed the point. Yes, I am an ex felon, with the accent on ex. That is one of the possible consequences of suffering from the disease of addiction/alcoholism. I did not spend 27 years in prison; I was hopelessly addicted to drugs and alcohol for nearly 27 years. As a result of my addiction, I spent nearly 17 years in jails, prisons, and drug treatment facilities. I was trapped in the hopeless cycle of my disease. I went through countless detox and treatment centers only to be forced back to the areas where the disease flourishes best. Places like Sepulveda Blvd. or Downtown LA.

I am 61 years old and in my day, that was how addicts were treated. After jail or treatment we were pushed to the edges of society. Abandoned to the commercial or business areas where the cheap motels, cockroach infested hotels, and abandoned cardboard boxes were the only habitats available to us. This is where most addicts go to get their drugs. It is kind of like asking a guy with a weight problem to live in a bakery. Is it really any surprise why treatment centers, jails and prisons never worked?

Finally, in July of 1992, having to leave one more treatment center, with no where to go, my parole officer suggested the missing element in my system of recovery. He urged me to move into a sober living home. I lived there for a year. While I was living in this safe and structured environment I was able to build, for the first time, a solid base for my recovery. I was encouraged to go to 12 step meetings; I went. I was encouraged to get a sponsor and work the twelve steps; I did. It was suggested I make financial and emotional amends wherever I had done harm; I am still making some of those amends. From this sober living home, located in the residential district of Tarzana, I received the emotional and spiritual support to whip this disease one day at a time. This is precisely why I am in the field of recovery. It is my past which gives me the credentials to help others like myself.

That was 16 years ago. I thought I had repaid my debt that society had placed on me. Ince then I've attended college and was awarded an Associates degree in psychology. Now I am a family man I have been married for almost 8 years. I have a beautiful 2 year old daughter. I am a property owner. I work, I vote, and I pay my taxes; all because a sober living home in a residential neighborhood gave me a chance. My story is not unusual. Two recent studies have demonstrated that a recovering person who spends a year in a sober living home has a better than an eighty percent chance of staying clean for the next 5 years. See:

(<http://www.jointogether.org/news/research/pressreleases/2005/studies-find-community-based.html>).

Anyway, I went to that meeting because I thought I could be of assistance to the community I lived in. I thought that if somebody really wanted to regulate sober living homes then it might be important to have someone with the knowledge of how a sober living works. Especially since I already belong to a group dedicated to providing safe, clean, inexpensive, quality sober living homes, as well as improving community relations. I told my story, I passed out my cards, I offered to be of assistance in any way I could to all the council members present. In fact, I have given my card to Peggy Burgess, Councilman Smith and the Chief of Police as well. It's been months since then and no one has tried to make any contact with me.

Yeah, I remember Peggy; she helped to write the request for regulating sober livings to Councilman Smith. That proposal was one of the most insulting documents I have ever read. When some of the other council members suggested that the hate message be cleaned up and that a sentence, which described recovering people as undesirables, be removed from the document, Peggy in protest, angrily got up and stormed from the room.

In her article, Peggy appeared to slant her accusations towards me as well as the other houses and sober home owners in the sober living coalition. She wrote as if she has some inside knowledge about the owners and how we operate. She seems to have a lot of problems with the truth in that area. First, she tries to give the appearance that we are greedy and unethical businessmen and women, saying that we charge 250 to 500 dollars per bed per week. If you go to the www.soberhousing.net site, then you will see that over 80 percent of our homes charge 150 dollars or less per week. My homes even provide three meals a day at this price. The homes that cost more are for those who can afford it. Indeed, addiction/alcoholism attacks the wealthy too. She wrongfully accuses us of housing known sex offenders. In fact we, as a coalition in the valley, do not accept membership from homes that cater to sex offenders. I post it right on my websites. She says we do not drug test, year we do. I can show you receipts for test going back ten years. She says we tolerate people who drink and use drugs to live in our homes, we don't. We couldn't stay open long if we did. She says we are not responsible to anyone. That is not even close to being true. I am not talking about the outlaw homes or the bad homes that are causing problems. I can only speak for the members of the Sober Living Coalition. We are responsible to the Los Angeles Sober Living Network, The San Fernando Sober Living Coalition, the council members who live in the homes, the Department of Building and Safety, The Fire Marshalls, and The Health Department. If we violate any law, then we are responsible to the police and the justice system; just like every other citizen living in the valley. No one has to take my word for any of this: go to my websites or come to my house and then I will show you the drug tests and the rules which all Recovery Zone Council Members sign and respect. Talk to us or talk to my neighbors and see for yourselves. We are not hiding. We are in the phone books as well as all over the internet.

She points out that sober homes are full of alcoholics and addicts (ah duh). The

problem is she does it without mentioning that we are recovering. Probably the only truth in her opinion piece is that some of us are convicted felons who are or were on probation or parole; yes a few of us are ex-offenders, but not all; not even close to most. She wants you to forget we are rehabilitating ourselves. Her article would lead many to believe that people in recovery are a group of transient, sex offending, paranoid schizophrenic criminals. She further asserts we have no stake in the community and should be removed from residential neighborhoods. While she didn't point it out in this article, she does make a point of saying that group homes bring property values down. Here is a direct quote from the American Planning Association: "More than 50 studies have examined their impact on property values probably more than for any other small land use. Although they use a variety of methodologies, all researchers have discovered that group homes and halfway houses do not affect property values of even the house next door."

Having Peggy chair a neighborhood planning committee is a little like putting the Grand Wizard in charge of race relations. She will repeat any lie that serves her purpose. Peggy attacks recovering people and sober homes as a whole. She calls us a "blight on the neighborhood". She draws no distinction between well run sober living homes and poorly operated ones. She does not differentiate between recovering alcoholic/addicts and those currently lost in active addiction. She parallels criminals and reformed sober living home owners as if there is no difference. She dumps us all in the same basket and writes about us as if we are all the same. The last time I checked this was called prejudice and advocating removing us from our homes is called discrimination. That is not only mean spirited, it is against the law. As recovering people, we have the same rights as any other American, how would you like it if you decided to stop drinking and were told you would have to move now. Peggy doesn't seem to mind the drunks living on her block. She doesn't protest the liquor stores, the crack dealers, or gang members that choke our North Hills neighborhood. But if you decide to stop drinking or using drugs or you try to be a part of the solution, then beware, because Peggy is standing vigilantly by with a regulation to toss you out of the neighborhood.

I would like to particularly address the transient allegation. Sober Living Homes SERVE THE PEOPLE WHO LIVE IN THE VALLEY. Ninety five percent of the people who live in my homes (and all other sober living home in the coalition), lived in the Valley prior to moving into the home. Some have lived here for years, others were born and raised right here. Of the people who live in my homes, 25 percent have lived with us a year or longer. I have guys living with me for over 5 years, that's right I still live in a sober living home.

With 1 out of every 9 people in America suffering from some sort of drug or alcohol problem (look it up on the internet), does Peggy think the valley is immune. The people we serve are the sons and daughters of the people who live here. They are the discarded loved ones, the husbands, wives, brothers, sisters, friends and neighbors of someone who lives in this area.

She says we have no stake in the community; everyone who lives in my homes, who can work, is either working or looking for work. We pay taxes (city, state and federal) and those that can vote, vote. We have faces; we are carpenters, plumbers, salespeople, gardeners, secretaries, housewives, lawyers, doctors, nurses, and Indian chiefs. The disease of addiction knows no boundaries. Contrary to opponents of sober living (those that claim tax dollars support us), people who live in sober livings must pay there own way. This is an across the board statement, there are very few people (less than 5 percent in my homes) for whom the state is willing to pay. If this is a dollars and cents issue, then we save taxes payers' immeasurable amounts of money every day.

Peggy, I lost my family, my home, my freedom, my health, my self respect, my self worth, my god and I hated me more than you could ever even possibly begin to understand; all because of my addiction. Even today in my recovery my head is not my friend. I can't help the thoughts of wanting to use drugs and alcohol. I constantly pick at myself, all the wasted years, all the harm I did to myself and others. I have a conscience today. I remind myself I may not live long enough to see my daughter grow up because of health issues caused by my drug use. It is not as bad as it was sixteen years ago, but it is still there. I just buried my mother and father this month and your unprovoked attack on me has increased my burdens even more. That is why I need the support of other addicts' and alcoholics' they understand that there is no cure for this disease, only a daily reprieve. I need their empathy to carry me through the hard times even now. I need their reminders that, for me, there is no taking a valium with a beer, just this once, to relax and forget. I am an addict, there is no such thing as once for me. You see Peggy this disease is trying to kill me and every addict/alcoholic like me. It is responsible for over 100,000 deaths every year - many of which could have been prevented with the help of a treatment center, a sober living home and the tolerance of a community that cares.

We are not transients Peggy, we are your neighbors. How many of us have to lose our homes so you can have a secured parking space? Will you be more comfortable because you can't hear the ambulance when it comes to scrape our dead bodies off the curbs of Sepulveda? How many more of us have to die before you become willing to put up with a few nuisances? We are willing to work this out, but how can we if you won't even give us a chance? I can forgive you your hatred; I realize it is based in ignorance. Can you forgive me for my past and work with us so that we all might have a better life?

I think the biggest slap in the face came from Councilman Greg Smith when he posted Peggy's opinion piece on his personal la.org website. Why would a city official, claiming to represent the people of our neighborhood, so proudly wave this hateful and inaccurate article as if he is in support of this kind of discrimination? Why didn't he post the positive article and let people see some of the benefits of sober living? The biggest question is: why doesn't he seek the support of people who know something about the daily operations of sober living homes? If Councilman Smith really wants to make a difference in the quality of our neighborhoods, then he needs to understand the whole picture, not just the one sided picture painted by Peggy.

A lot of people seem to be interested in sober living homes. Senator George Runner, and Councilwoman Wendy Gruel each sent an aid out to talk with us and offered to be of assistance if they could, but they are not drafting a bill to regulate group homes. Councilman Smith, on the other hand, has ignored numerous phone calls as well as a personal plea from me to even send his aid or allow our group to help the committee with the proposed legislation. Maybe I am paranoid, but it seems Councilman Smith is more interested in eliminating sober living homes than he is in regulating them

We understand there are problems with some crack houses and sex offender houses that lie and call themselves sober living homes. We know there are independent sober living homes that are run poorly. There are also problems with well run sober living homes. In the nine years I have been doing this I have had my share of problems. I have made mistakes, but I also make adjustments to solve the problems and make my neighbors happy. Many of the current problems that exist could be eliminated with just a little cooperation between sober living home residents, their neighbors, the police, and Councilman Smith.

Addicts define insanity as: doing the same thing and expecting different results. Isn't it time we set our preconceived opinions aside and try something different. Tell us Councilman, where are the thousands who will be made homeless to go if your regulations make it too expensive to operate? How many sober living homes will have to close their doors? Will we just build another expensive prison for those who relapse and resume a criminal lifestyle? Will we allow the taxpayers to pay the bills of one exorbitant treatment center after another? Will we just continue to build the coffins for those that are not lucky enough to go to prison? How much money will it cost us to eliminate a process that is slightly flawed, but works, in order to reestablish a costly one that has never worked? If you have a better idea, then let us hear it. If not, then don't throw out the baby with the bathwater. Please work with us. There is too much at stake here to simply let egos, ignorance and old ideas blind us to the realities of the benefits that sober living homes bring to their respective communities.

Thank you,

Claude 'Ike' Eichar

Sub-chairman of the San Fernando Valley Sober Living Coalition

Member of the Los Angeles Sober Living Network

Board member of LASLN

Owner of the Recovery Zone and Comfort Zone Sober Living Homes