

RentReady Wisconsin Mentor Interaction General Guidelines

Thank you for choosing to participate in the RentReady program as a mentor, we are excited for the rewarding opportunities for everyone involved in this process. While any of the post-placement services you chose to offer are solely up to you or your organization, they are also equally up to the graduate as to what if any they chose to accept. There should be ideally 2 mentors assigned to each graduate, one can be primary and the other secondary, or both equal partners, whatever works best for your situation.

We do ask that mentors who work with persons in the program not provide graduates with money. Please ensure everyone working with you is aware of this guideline, as well as the general items that follow below. Re-purposed items such as clothing, dishes or furniture are fine and may be welcome and needed as persons transition into housing, and we do have the ability through various groups to find these items, as well as getting them delivered. Please contact a RentReady counselor to check on availability of these items and arrange for delivery if needed.

The initial need, as many do not have driver's license, is a ride to view potential rental properties from the list provided to each person certified through RentReady. Understand that graduates will be strongly encouraged to work with their mentors but are not required to, though most will welcome the assistance and companionship, our most successful graduates have had strong mentor relationships.

We encourage all those who are participating in the RentReady program as mentors, to familiarize themselves with the basic interaction guidelines of the program. To help facilitate this we offer some general guidance regarding what partnering should look like for the benefit of all parties engaging in this aspect of the RentReady post-placement support. It is strongly recommended that to get into the mindset of many of the persons you will be working with that mentors read; ***Evicted*** the Pulitzer Prize winning book about actual people and events in Milwaukee, it is an eye opening sometimes painful read, but necessary to get into the mindset of the persons you will be working with and their life stories. Other recommendations are ***When Helping Hurts*** or ***Toxic Charity*** both of which examine how to help on a deeper forward-thinking level, without inadvertently hurting them, or ourselves in the process.

The key idea to ensure success, particularly from the beginning, is to help participants get off on the right foot and stay the course through the critical first year. We want to give each graduate the greatest chance of success to enjoy the benefits that come with a year of solid rent experience on their housing resumé. It is impossible to imagine every situation or scenario that might come up in your relationship between client and sponsor, so we offer an overview ideas on how best to make this work;

- First, as an organization and individually, **determine what your boundaries are ahead of time** in terms of what help you are willing to offer to the Rent Ready graduate. We recommend two persons or mentors be assigned to each graduate, particularly if they are the opposite sex and visiting the home. You don't need to give the graduate a specific list, but know your limits and be prepared to say no to any requests you are not sure of. **Money should be strictly off limits.**
- As a sponsor, you are not expected to solve all the day to day problems that can occur in anyone's situation. **Don't feel you need to bail them out continuously** if they are not making good decisions- personal, financial or otherwise. Do not enable potentially unhealthy behaviors.
- A good starting point for many is to **help them establish a plan**, graduates will understand where they are at in life and how they arrived there, most will have a desire to aspire further, but **seldom have a road map to follow to help them achieve success.** This may involve additional education, counseling, job training, budgeting or other life skills. Let them develop

the plan but assist on the pathway and thought process, asking pertinent questions along the way helping to establish a written plan on how to get to where they strive to be in life.

- If you are not sure what is an appropriate amount of help, **contact a RentReady counselor for advice especially regarding any obvious 'red flags'** that the program managers should know about. Has someone lost their job? Has there been a big change in their health or mental/emotional display? Are they constantly asking for money for 'unexpected emergencies' etc. Also given the background of many in the program be aware of changes caused by reintroduced outside influences such as an abusive person from their past, or a former addict friend. These types of things are red flags that can cause abrupt changes in behavior.
- Every time you say 'yes' to something it may get that much harder to say 'no' the next time, so **if you are in doubt, DON'T, if it doesn't feel right, it probably isn't.** If there is a major emergency (car or medical) try to help them through it by exploring all available options, such as assisting with negotiating with the medical provider for reduced payment options, etc. If it is more complex than that, talk to your sponsoring organization about possible solutions. If that does not yield a solution or additional guidance is needed contact a RentReady counselor.
- Are you willing to help out with a ride to get groceries once a week or a ride to church? Great! But what if they ask you to baby sit or drop them off at work each day, or carpool the kids? **It is important for the long-term success of these clients that they demonstrate and practice as much self-responsibility as they are able to,** because this program is for them a one time opportunity. Most are not going to want to risk failure. Be consistent and clear with your boundaries. Many times "helping" can and does do more long term damage than the perceived short term immediate benefit. Ask yourself and them what is the goal, refer back to the plan.
- Like anything, too much of a good thing can have unintended consequences. **Be careful not to create an atmosphere of dependency.** It is possible that the person you are trying to help has treated or un-treated addiction issues, or is chronically late with appointments and fails to fulfill their obligations on time, such as rent. While you don't need to be an expert on human behavior- just **remember to walk with, not walk for- your sponsee.** When in doubt simply ask questions about their established goals helping them envision that journey of the path forward.
- From time to time, we can all use a little help and encouragement. We can offer time spent together, advice, or occasional favors, whatever you are comfortable doing. **BUT, it is not your sole responsibility to make sure this person complies with the intention of RentReady.** Some people will not make it a full year, that possibility is included in the administration of the program. Again, if you see or suspect warning signs, let the RentReady counselors know.
- On the flip side, **the person you are offering to walk along side has boundaries as well.** If they are not interested in attending church or engaging in discussions about religion, politics or their life-style, what they do in their free time, etc. respect their boundary. They are under no obligation to respond to that. And **if you feel you have a right to bargain about these things, don't do it!** Love, understanding, listening and encouraging them to talk through and figure out things on their own will go a long way. Ideally the assistance that is given ensures that the graduate has a much better chance of making it through the first 12 months and well beyond, only offer guidance that is requested, while striving for empathy, which will go a long way.
- If things are not working out for whatever reason, don't be afraid to ask that another mentor take over for you, this doesn't reflect on you personally and is the right thing to do, your heart is in the right place, sometimes personalities just don't mesh. **Live, learn and grow from each experience,** and be ready to help the next person or family.