ACROSS THE TABLE · FREE GUIDE

Before You Buy the House

The recovery residence operator checklist: a one-week walk through the questions to answer before a property becomes a sober living home, so the home gets full, stays full and actually helps the people inside it.

Built from Esther Jackson-Stowell's conversation with **Darrell McCollough**, founder of Start A Sober Living and the Recovery Residence Operators Academy.

START HERE

You are not in the housing business.

Most people start with a house, add beds, print a flyer and go looking for people. Darrell has watched that order fail for seven years. His correction fits on one line: you are in the admissions business, and this is a people business before it is anything else.

THE WRONG ORDER	THE RIGHT ORDER
1. Get a house	1. Market research
2. Put beds in it	2. Who lives here (ICP 1)
3. Make a flyer	3. Who refers them (ICP 2)
4. Try to find people	4. Then the house

"A lot of people think that they're in the housing business. You're actually in the admissions business."

DARRELL MCCOLLOUGH, ACROSS THE TABLE

This checklist walks you through the right order in five steps, one a day. Nothing here is legal advice; it is the set of questions a seven-year operator wishes every new operator had answered first.

1 STEP ONE · IS THIS THE RIGHT OPPORTUNITY FOR YOU

Three honest tests before the spreadsheet.

Darrell's own screen for a would-be operator is short. Answer all three in writing. If any answer is no, the rest of this guide can wait.

TEST	WHAT IT MEANS	YES / NO
A property sits empty 30, 60 or 90 days	Vacancy you already carry is the cleanest starting point. Buying new inventory for this is a different, riskier decision.	
You want to help people	Residents are in a rebuilding stage. They will test the program, and they will grow or wreck the home depending on how it is run.	
You can run a program, not just a rental	Chores, job searches, drug testing, house meetings, accountability. If you only want rent, stay a landlord.	

His numbers, your math

Darrell says a well-run home can earn a multiple of what the same property rents for. Treat that as his figure, not a promise. Put your own rent, your realistic occupancy and your real costs on the next page before you believe any multiple.

The question that stopped Esther

"Not everyone can actually manage people in sober living." The money follows the program. It never leads it.

My honest answer today: _____

2 STEP TWO · MARKET RESEARCH AND ICP 1

Decide who lives in your house.

"People don't realize there's Golden Girls houses." Before a single bed goes in, choose the resident you are building for. Every later decision, from house rules to referral sources to pricing, follows from this one.

HOUSE TYPE	WHO IT SERVES	WHAT IT NEEDS	FIT FOR ME
Golden Girls house	Women 55 and up	Quiet, accessible, medical appointments, community	
Workforce house	People landing in a new city who need a place to work from	Transit, early mornings, job-search support	
Trucker house	Drivers between routes who need stability off the road	Parking, flexible hours, clear check-in rules	
Reentry house	People leaving incarceration or inpatient treatment	Structure, officer coordination, intensive outpatient nearby	
My own idea			

Market research, the operator's way

How many recovery residences already serve this group within 20 minutes?

_____

What do they charge per bed per month? _____ Are they full?

_____

What does my chosen resident need that nobody nearby offers?

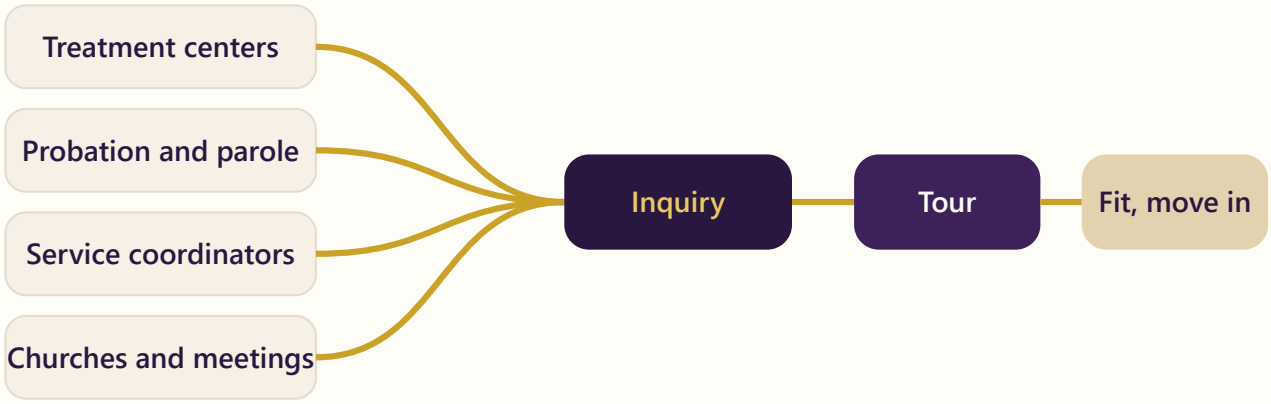
_____

Darrell's note: "You want to know exactly who your client is." A house built for everyone fills for no one.

3 STEP THREE · ICP 2, THE REFERRAL SOURCES

The admissions pipeline is the business.

"It's the referral sources and that admissions pipeline that transforms a home into a sober living business." Your second customer is whoever sends people to your door. List them before you open, and meet them before you need them.



REFERRAL SOURCE	CONTACT NAME	WHAT THEY NEED FROM ME	MET?

Nose to nose, toes to toes

Darrell books a tour for every inquiry. Sit down at the table and decide together whether this person fits the culture already in the house. The tour is where admissions happens.

4 STEP FOUR · THE PROGRAM

Set up a program so good that they tell on you.

> *"Man, Darrell is making me do my chores, making me look for jobs, drug testing me." And the judge, the probation officer, the service coordinator think: that's what we're paying him to do.*

DARRELL MCCOLLOUGH

A home with accountability and fairness from the first day protects the residents, the neighbors and you. Write yours before move-in day, then put it in every resident's hands.

- [ ] House rules, in writing, signed at move-in
- [ ] Scope of practice: where my role starts and stops, and who I refer to
- [ ] Chores, curfew and house meetings on a posted schedule
- [ ] Job search and program attendance expectations
- [ ] Drug and alcohol testing policy, and what happens on a positive result
- [ ] How residents connect to a meeting, a church, a mosque, a community, and to service inside it
- [ ] Incident log, grievance path and a written exit process
- [ ] Boundaries: "sometimes what we think is help is actually hurting"

Competent, not improvised

NARR, the National Alliance for Recovery Residences, is asking for competent operators because too many homes were set up by asking a search engine. Standards and certification differ by state; check yours before you open.

What success looks like

Addiction is hard and sneaky. The residents who do well are connected: a meeting, a congregation, and a way to serve. Build that connection into the program, not around it.

5 STEP FIVE · NOW THE HOUSE

Only now does the property get a vote.

With the resident, the referral sources and the program decided, the house becomes a fit question instead of a hope. Darrell's figures on why demand keeps growing are his to qualify; your figures on this house are yours to prove.

ASK	WHY IT MATTERS	ANSWER
Does the location serve my resident?	Transit, work, meetings, treatment programs within reach	
What do licensing and certification require here?	Rules vary by state and city; some require certification before a referral source will send anyone	
How will neighbors and zoning respond?	A good operator talks to the community before the community talks about the house	
What does a full month cost to run?	Mortgage or rent, utilities, testing, staffing, insurance, repairs, the empty bed you will always have	
What is break-even occupancy?	Beds that must be full for the home to pay for itself, before any profit	

The money question, honestly

Esther's line from the conversation: "Money's great, don't get me wrong, but you're also dealing with people." Run the numbers on the house. Run the program for the people.

One step this week

"Seek out a coach, whether that's me or someone else." There are too many mistakes you will not know you made until you pay for them. Get someone who has done it to look at your plan before you sign.

Who I will ask to review this plan: _____ By: _____

KEEP GOING

Go deeper with Darrell and Esther



Darrell McCollough

Clean since June 22, 2009. Opened three sober livings in California, then built Start A Sober Living and the Recovery Residence Operators Academy to create competent operators for the people who live in these homes. Based in Dallas, originally from Stockton, California.

WEBSITE startasoberliving.com
THE ACADEMY 12 weeks live, Mondays and Wednesdays, CRRO designation
GET FULL, STAY FULL the 90-day plan to fill the house and keep it full
FREE property assessment, Texas Recovery Housing Report, Thursday 7 p.m. training



Esther Jackson-Stowell

Host of The Broker's Table, where faith, family and money sit down together. Principal real estate broker, author and mother of four.

PODCAST thebrokerstable.com
FREE TOOLS thebrokerstable.com/tools
FREE GUIDES thebrokerstable.com/free
INSTAGRAM @thebrokerstable

Watch the full conversation

Across the Table: "You Are Not in the Housing Business" with Darrell McCollough, on The Broker's Table YouTube channel and podcast apps, from Tuesday, November 24, 2026.