

A Place of His Own: DRO helps Patrick Chittum establish a life in the community



DRO client Patrick Chittum stands outside his new apartment.

Patrick Chittum's new apartment is small – just one bedroom, a bathroom, a living room and a kitchen. But when you ask him the best part of living there, he says, "Freedom. I can do whatever I want. I can go outside whenever I want. I can get a job. I've reconnected with my family." It's a welcome change that was a long time coming.

Chittum, 40, spent five years living in a nursing facility after a series of life events caused him to have difficulty paying his bills and paying for medication to treat his schizo-affective disorder.

"I had a job at a manufacturing company, and I was doing fine," Chittum remembers. "But then the company started to have financial problems, so they cut my hours. I had to choose between paying for a roof over my head or paying for food and medication. I chose to pay my rent."

Eventually, he ended up living in his car, and the Franklin County Probate Court determined that he could no longer care for himself. He was placed in a hospital and put under guardianship. Chittum's guardian placed him in a nursing facility, although Chittum felt certain he could live in the community with the right supports. A [standard screening](#) given to all people before they move into a nursing facility confirmed Chittum's assertion. The guardian appealed the decision and went ahead with the placement.

"I really think he wanted to put me there and forget about me," Chittum says.

Leaving the Nursing Facility Behind

Life in a nursing facility is very structured and does not allow residents to make many choices. People in such facilities often don't have control of their days, since the nursing facility sets meal times and determines what activities will be allowed, cutting off the chance for residents to explore personal interests, make friends in the community or find meaningful employment. The experience can be incredibly boring and isolating. Small indignities, like having to wait to buy pop until 2 p.m. each day when the drink cart is brought out or being forced to remain indoors because no staff member is available to go outside, can make adults feel like children. This is sometimes worse when a guardian is withholding consent to activities or insisting on restrictions on the person's choices, and can even result in residents losing contact with their own families, which was the case for Chittum.

"My dad died in 2012, while I was living in the nursing home," he recalls. "I couldn't go to the funeral because it was too far away, and no one would drive me. I also lost my aunt, my stepbrother and my grandmother in that time. I couldn't go to any of those funerals, either. The nursing home staff wouldn't let us make phone calls when we wanted to. Over five years, I really lost touch with my family."

Chittum got connected with Disability Rights Ohio through the office of the state's Long-Term Care Ombudsman (LTCO). When his first guardian resigned, Chittum was granted a new temporary guardian—an order that expired in December 2014. The LTCO called DRO in February 2015 because the state of Chittum's guardianship was unclear, and he wanted to move into the community.

"Patrick was very motivated to regain his independence in the community," says Kevin Truitt, the DRO attorney who worked on the case. "He wanted to work and pay his own bills and live on his own—things most of us take for granted. We saw it as an opportunity to try to get him into Ohio's [Recovery Requires a Community](#) program, which was created to help people with mental health needs transition from nursing facilities back into the community. Patrick also applied for HOME Choice, a program that helps all people with disabilities move out of institutions and into the community."

Over a period of months, DRO worked with the LTCO, Chittum's new guardian, the Assistant Director of Nursing at the nursing home, a HOME Choice transition coordinator and the Recovery Requires a Community program to come up with a plan of action that would get Chittum into his own apartment. They determined the kinds of services he would need, found him an appropriate apartment and helped him find furniture and cookware for his new home. In August 2015, Chittum finally moved into an apartment.

The very first thing he did was find a job.

Finding Meaningful Work



DRO client Patrick Chittum wears his work uniform as he stands beside his car.

Within a week, Chittum was working part-time on the assembly line for a Honda automotive parts supplier in Marysville, and he eventually worked with his guardian to buy a 2008 Chevy Impala, which solved the transportation problems he'd been having. In November, he took a new job with a different supplier for more money and full-time hours. He's a very devoted employee.

"I haven't missed a day yet," he says. "On February 10, 2016, my 90 days as a temporary worker will be over, and I will have an interview with the HR department to become a permanent employee with full benefits. I have friends at work who watch out for me. My supervisor pats me on the back and tells me I'm doing a great job. It feels wonderful. I really have my independence back now."

That independence is supported by counseling sessions, case management services and a nurse who checks in on him three times a week. His fiancée, who still lives in the nursing facility and is also seeking to move into the community, comes to visit every other weekend. The couple is planning to get married once she's also won her independence.

"Patrick is a wonderful person who deserved a chance to regain the life of independence and self-sufficiency he had before," says Truitt. "It was very frustrating for him to be isolated from society for so many years, but he was so patient throughout the transition process. Sadly, there are others like him who haven't been as fortunate. The system is slowly changing to allow more people to live in our communities instead of facilities, but there is still a lot of work to be done."

Chittum hopes his story can be an example that people with mental illness can be successful in the community if given the chance. He wants people in similar situations to know that there is hope beyond the nursing facility.

“I am living proof that there is life and a chance to succeed outside of the nursing home,” he says. “I have found that work is the key to recovery. I would also encourage people to attend as many support groups as possible. I have gone to one at Wings here in Marysville, and it does help get over the lonely periods if you live alone. Also, don’t be afraid to seek help if needed or make friends with a new neighbor, but most important, never give up!”