Finding office space

We have discovered creative ways to find office space. One way is to contact existing practitioners in your area or sublet space. The difficulty with this plan is that you are at the mercy of their schedules. If schedules do mesh, make sure your niche is different from that of your office mates because this allows for cooperation rather than competition regarding referrals. For example, if one practitioner specializes in working with kids, a good match would be a therapist who sees adults or people with marriage issues.

Bob Walsh worked for years with young children but found that age eventually began to restrict some of his mobility. After doing play therapy on the floor with a 4-year-old, his 60-year-old bones took too long to straighten up, so the reality presented itself that it was time to partner with a younger, more nimble play therapy specialist. This specialist was looking to sublet office space, and her niche meshed perfectly with his specialty — working with teens and adults. As a result, cross referrals happened very naturally.

Another creative way to obtain office space is by contacting local physicians. For example, pediatricians, general practitioners and gynecologists may be especially open to sharing office space. In exchange for space, you might offer to conduct groups focused on parenting, marriage enrichment, weight loss, divorce recovery, stress management and so on in a conference room or waiting area. A doctor’s office has times when it is not in use, and doctors cannot always address all the psychological or emotional issues presented during a 10- to 12-minute office visit, so they may welcome an in-house counselor. A pediatrician, for example, might realize that having a parenting group run by a licensed counselor in the office waiting room on Saturday afternoons is an attractive addition to the practice. Having a counselor available in the office to see patients with psychological issues also enables the physician to focus on their medical problems.

If there is a cost for using the office, consider that it will be offset by the invaluable publicity and credibility of having your name visible in a high-traffic professional building visited daily by hundreds of potential clients.

If you follow this plan, it is best to target a doctor’s office that fits your niche. For example, if you work with children and families, a pediatrician is your best bet. A general practitioner’s office works well if you wish to do weight loss, divorce recovery or general mental health work. A gynecologist’s office is ideal if you would like to counsel women.

Approaching a physician with your idea to sublease office space may seem like a daunting task. Some counselors see doctors as very important medical professionals who may think of them as “only” a counselor. However, we have not found this to be the case. Bob Walsh has partnered with a group of pediatricians for several years — to the benefit of the doctors as well as the counselor. The doctors often consult with him to coordinate the medical and emotional treatment of many patients. The physicians periodical Unique Opportunities reported in its May/June 2008 article “Psychological Symbiosis” (uoworks.com/articles/behavioral.health.html) that physicians recognize the counselor/medical doctor relationship as being very beneficial.

Working out of the home can be an excellent way for counselors to not only hold costs down and have valuable tax write-offs, but also to provide a comfort-able, inviting space that is convenient for both clients and clinic. Given his niche working with “troubled,” oppositional male teenagers, Walsh decided it would be unwise to use his home for counseling. A father of teenagers himself, he anticipated potential complications in seeing teen clients in his home. Nevertheless, a home office is an excellent idea for those counselors working with couples and individual adults.

Itinerant counseling or counselor home visits are essential with certain individuals, including some older clients and clients with disabilities, because it may be difficult or impossible for them to travel. At our workshops, we have met many counselors who schedule appointments only in clients’ homes. This provides an invaluable benefit to these clients while also saving the counselor the expense of having an office with rent and utilities. There are other benefits to the counselor as well. Some travel expenses are tax deductible, and home visits are billable to managed care and insurance companies.

Online counseling has also become popular recently. At the 2009 American Counseling Association Conference & Exposition in Charlotte, N.C., two groups had booths with information and programs on helping counselors learn “cyber-counseling.” We suggest readers check out Counseling Today’s online treatment of this subject, which features the views of several different counselors (counseling.org/Publications/CounselingTodayArticles.aspx?AGuid=24ff952-69c6-4e50-bbc5-1abed1e7eb0d).

As one website touted, virtual office space is “fully staffed, operational and ready when you are!” A counselor in New Jersey shared at a recent workshop that a building which housed many available offices worked well for her. Every type of
office equipment, an office manager and a secretary, a kitchen and a large meeting room were all part of the deal. She paid a fee each month and was able to use the space as she wished.

Finally, renting or even buying an office or building is a great way to secure space. This is the route Norm Dasenbrook chose. Owning the building is an expensive investment, but the dividends can make it profitable, and collecting rent from tenants adds to the owner’s counselor’s income stream.

Choosing a location is an important consideration. The real estate mantra of “location, location, location” often holds true for counselors as well. When location is the primary focus of the search, there may be much more expense involved. Those starting “on a shoestring” may have to do some serious research to balance cost with prime space. Other important considerations to keep in mind are accessibility issues, public transportation, parking and safety concerns for clients and counselors.

We hope these ideas will help counselors with a limited budget to explore their options and eventually invest some capital in the sites they occupy.

It’s not too early to plan for the 2010 ACA Conference & Exposition in Pittsburgh, March 18-22. The Learning Institutes and Education Sessions look very interesting. We will be presenting our private practice workshop and providing free individual consultations in the exhibit center. Look for additional information on ACA’s website at counseling.org/conference.

ACA members can e-mail their questions to Robert J. Walsh and Norman C. Dasenbrook at walshgasp@aol.com and access a series of “Private Practice Pointers” on the ACA website at counseling.org.

Letters to the editor:
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