

# The Homestay Times

Ideas for Homestay Coordinators in North America • Spring 2001

## From the Editor

Welcome to the first issue of The Homestay Times, a newsletter for homestay coordinators across North America.

We have included plenty of ideas for your homestay program – we hope you find them useful! We welcome your feedback in the form of letters to the editor. As well, we are seeking articles for the next issue of The Homestay Times, which will be published in Fall 2001.

This newsletter is sent at no charge to homestay coordinators. If you know anyone who would like to be included on our mailing list, please contact me at 613-542-9876 or by email at [info@ici-canada.com](mailto:info@ici-canada.com)

The publishers of The Homestay Times, ICI Communications Canada Inc., also publish The Essential Guide for Homestay Students in North America. More than 15,000 copies of the book have been distributed by high schools, language programs, exchange programs, colleges and universities. Homestay programs are using the book as an orientation tool, as a reference for students throughout their homestay and as a guide for host families.

We hope you enjoy this issue and look forward to hearing from you!

Danielle Aubin  
Editor



## Be Prepared

*Legal issues can be a minefield so it's essential to spell out rights and responsibilities*



It was a homestay coordinator's nightmare. Just two weeks into a homestay, a student and his host mother were in a war of words. The host mother ended up throwing the student out of the house, literally tossing his belongings onto the front lawn. The student had paid for an entire college semester and asked for his homestay fee back. The host mother, furious at the behavior of the student, refused saying: "If you want it, you'll have to sue me." Now, the homestay coordinator is helping the student take the host mother to court in order to get his money back.

This situation, and others like it, demonstrate the need for homestay programs to be prepared for legal and liability issues to protect students, host families and the program.

In this particular case, there was no contract between the student and the homestay program or between the homestay program and the host family. As a result, the legal duties and financial obligations were unclear.

What are the legal issues involved in homestay? Clearly, these will vary somewhat depending on the jurisdiction's own legal framework. As a homestay coordinator, you should seek advice from a lawyer in your area to ensure that laws and regulations are being followed. As well, homestay programs need business liability insurance for protection in the event of a lawsuit.

Contracts between the various parties spell out responsibilities and provide some legal protection. Here's a look at what different contracts should include:

### **Between a homestay program and a student:**

The contract should cover the basics of the homestay program – the type of accommodation provided, meals, laundry facilities and telephone use.

The contract must indicate the program fees and withdrawal policy. This is essential so that should a student move out of a host family's house, everyone knows how much money, if any, will be returned. If a deposit is required for damage or long-distance telephone use, the contract should specify when and under what circumstances it will be returned.

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# Orientation Ideas

*“A good orientation takes a fair amount of time. But there’s no beating it in reducing problems.”*

Homestay coordinators use a variety of tools in their orientations for students and hosts, from handbooks to videos to skits to checklists. If there’s common ground, it’s the subject matter: The goal is to welcome students to the city and hosts to the program, but also to address issues before they come to a boil.

“A good orientation takes a fair amount of time. But there’s no beating it in reducing problems,” says Valerie Peters, homestay manager at Langara College in Vancouver, British Columbia.

Langara students receive an orientation on the first day, with a slide show including photographs of how to take the bus and the Skytrain rapid transit system. The students are given an information pack-

age that includes details on emergency procedures and an emergency card to fill out with the host family that night, listing who to call if they get lost. “The big issue the first day is getting lost. This allows us to tell them what to do. They now have the basics,” she says.

When the hosts arrive to pick up the students, they are given a checklist of matters to discuss that night, such as where to find extra blankets; how to use the washer, dryer and microwave; and how to add items to the family shopping list. “They go around the house with the student and check everything off,” she says. “They don’t have to think about it as we have given them a thorough list.”

The next day, after a good night’s rest, the students are given a second, 1 1/2-hour orientation – this time assisted by a video on common homestay issues. Peters talks about student safety – what is acceptable and unacceptable behavior, and what to do if they feel unsafe. She also uses the session to check if they are comfortable with their rooms and if their

meals are OK. “This is my chance to gauge their reactions to their host family,” she says.

Langara uses experienced homestay students in her orientation program, seeking their advice in preparing material and also having them on occasion speak to the hosts. “They know best what information we should be giving. And they are thrilled that they are contributing to future students



who will come to the country,” she says.

Kristin Higgins begins her orientations for the American Cultural Exchange in Seattle with an icebreaker: Students play some communication games in which they can’t talk but need to express something. That spirit carries on throughout the orientation, as she intersperses humorous quizzes and other lively activities with more standard material on the program.

The students might be asked, “What do you do if you are late?” The choices are: a) phone your host; b) phone your host; c) phone your host; and d) phone your host. To sensitize them to the need to treat the family’s animals well, she will ask, “If you don’t like a dog, is it OK to kick at it or shout at it?” Another question: “Is it OK to ask the host how much money he or she makes?”

The students also watch skits in which, for example, a student is asked if he wants some fruit and he immediately grabs 10 pieces. The audience is then asked to comment on the skit. “Sometimes they are baffled by the questions and aren’t sure what is right or wrong. So learning is happening,”

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## TIPS FOR INTERVIEWING PROSPECTIVE HOST FAMILIES

Choosing great host families is, of course, critical to the success of your program. Here are some areas that should be covered in the host-selection interview:

**Money:** The homestay fee should not be the primary motivation for hosting. Host families should demonstrate an interest in meeting new people and enjoying a cross-cultural experience. Be certain that the host family is not dependent on having a student to meet a mortgage or other bills.

**Agreement:** All members of the family must want to host a student. Be sure that it is not just one person's idea and the spouse is reluctantly going along with it. Watch out for the disgruntled teenager, who could sabotage the homestay experience for a student.

**Expectations:** Make sure that the hosts understand that students are not babysitters. As well, make it clear whether your program expects students to help with after-dinner cleanup and the occasional meal preparation. Hosts must be willing to be home almost every night to provide dinner – check to make sure that work or other responsibilities will not prevent them from meeting this obligation.

**Religion:** Family members must respect the religious beliefs (or lack thereof) of the student. While students may be invited to attend religious services, the family should not apply pressure to attend regularly. The family should be open to learning about the student's beliefs and respecting them.

**Inspection:** Tour the house to check that it is clean and meets the needs of your program. The student's room should include a window that opens, a desk or table with good lighting and a good heating system.



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Higgins says. "The key is to identify what the problems are and then try to work something around it that is unusual, active and fun. If you just spout off, they forget it."

Odette Larde, housing coordinator for the English language programs at the University of California at Berkeley

Extension, uses a slideshow to prepare all the summer program students for life in the university town. After that 75-minute session, she gives homestay students a separate orientation on their issues while hosts are simultaneously provided their own information. Food is a focus for her session – she stresses that there is no need to wait for food to be offered several times before taking some. "In the United States you have to be fast or you won't get any," she tells them. "We want you to go home fatter than you came."

Stephanie Soccio-Marandola, at Niagara College in Ontario, uses *The Essential Guide for Homestay Students in North America* as an orientation tool. The booklet is published in seven languages and covers everything from culture shock to food to operating household appliances. The college mails it in advance to students or gives it out at the orientation, and then uses it to discuss pertinent issues, such as the different dinner and bath times in North America. "The book touches on a lot of our problems. It works very well – a nice point of reference," she says. Hosts are given the same book: "We find it very useful for them. It adds to their view of what this is about."

At Mount Royal College in Calgary, Alberta, orientation for students is held on the third days of classes – a half-hour session for all students and then an extra half hour for the homestay students, for which Pam Schur, the student services coordinator, uses some handouts and a PowerPoint presentation. "They need to know what acceptable behavior is – how late can you cook, and how much water consumption is OK," she says.

This was the first year she held an orientation and it significantly reduced the number of problems during the term. "It was like night and day," she says. "They handled stuff better. They also came to me sooner rather than later with issues, and that helps as well. The orientation was a big improvement." ☺



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## The Essential Guide For Homestay Students

An important part of any homestay program, The Essential Guide for Homestay Students in North America is a booklet that helps students become oriented to living with North American families. It covers everything from culture shock to rights and responsibilities to making meals. The booklet is available in seven languages – Arabic, Chinese, English, Japanese, Korean, Portuguese and Spanish.

Homestay programs across the United States and Canada have found that the book is an invaluable addition to their program.

For more information about The Essential Guide for Homestay Students, please contact Danielle Aubin at 613-542-9876.

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[www.homestayguide.com](http://www.homestayguide.com)

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It should clearly state the program's expectations of students in homestay and the program's policies. The student consents to abide by the program's policies and also with the laws of the jurisdiction. The contract should state that the student can be asked to leave the program if he or she does not abide by the program rules. Criminal offences such as sexual assault and theft have occurred in homestay programs in the past and it is essential that everyone involved know that these will be treated seriously.

The homestay program should verify that the student has actually read the contract and signed it himself. Education agents have been known to sign the contracts without even showing them to the student.

If the student is a minor, it is important to have a release form signed by the parents or guardians. Programs involving minors have special legal requirements – for example, is the host family responsible for enforcing a curfew and making sure that a student attends school? Parents should also be aware of the program's policies in a medical emergency.

### Other legal issues include:

**Disabilities:** An increasing number of international students visiting the U.S. and Canada have disabilities such as blindness and being in a wheelchair. Do you have host families that can accommodate these students and, if not, are you prepared for the legal issues in denying students housing?

**Discrimination:** Some students may request a host family that is white. Immigrants with less than perfect English may apply to be host parents. The homestay program must be ready to deal with these requests, from both a policy and legal viewpoint.

### Between the homestay program and host families:

The contract should make clear the responsibilities of the hosts. The host family should agree to follow all policies of the homestay program and the laws of the jurisdiction. As well, the contract must indicate situations where the host family is required to refund the homestay fee to the student.

The program must have the right to move a student at any time for any reason and this should be stated in the contract. There may be situations, such as when a student accuses a host parent of sexual assault, where it is not possible to reveal the reason that a student is being moved. In the case of such serious allegations, it is imperative that a student be moved immediately. In these cases, the program should have emergency host families available to take in students.

Contracts ensure that all parties are aware of their rights and responsibilities. Of course, the best way to prevent incidents from happening is preparation – proper screening of host families, thorough orientation for both hosts and students and clear expectations for all parties. Some orientation ideas are included on Page 2 of this newsletter. ☺

