“There are the typical financial challenges that exist within affordable housing, but they’re exacerbated when you’re serving individuals who are chronically homeless, because many of them have physical and mental illnesses,” says Dana Trujillo, Development Director for the Skid Row Housing Trust. “From a political perspective, it’s really difficult to enter into new communities and build relationships with the surrounding community. There’s a lot of fear about permanent supportive housing and what it means for a community, and I think it’s just for lack of knowledge.”
Recent efforts demonstrate benefits of permanent supportive housing
Skid Row Housing Trust is an established affordable housing developer that has focused on providing permanent supportive housing options in the Skid Row area of downtown Los Angeles for the past 25 years. The organization is gearing its efforts toward creating permanent supportive housing to serve the chronically homeless by maximizing innovative partnerships and housing models.

Two of these efforts include New Genesis and the Star Apartments. Both are intended to address the problem of homelessness on a deeper, more sustainable level.

“Both projects, for very different reasons, really emphasize how public-private partnerships are key in addressing homelessness,” says Dana Trujillo, Development Director for Skid Row Housing Trust. “There’s not necessarily one model for doing it, but it’s very important to have a collaborative process to come up with a model that works for where you are developing and who you are serving.”

LOOKING AT PERMANENT SUPPORTIVE HOUSING
Originally a residential hotel, the New Genesis community stems from a 30-unit residential hotel the Trust acquired in the late 1980s. Leveraging the parking lot next to the original building to create a new mixed-use building and ex-
expanding the residential component to 106 units.

“In terms of significance, it is a very integrated, multi-user, multi-use building in a very active mainstream part of downtown Los Angeles,” Trujillo says. “It’s located in an area where there are a lot of commercial, retail and art uses. New Genesis has 75 percent formerly homeless individuals and 25 percent low-income individuals, many of whom are artists, as well as commercial uses on the ground floor. It’s really a model for having a lot of integrated uses and showing that special needs, formerly homeless individuals can integrate within a mainstream, very active market-rate community.”

Similarly, the Star Apartments was built to serve a market in need of affordable housing options in the heart of the Skid Row neighborhood. The effort, completed in October 2013, focused on providing an alternative housing option to the area’s residents and promoting healthy living.

“There is an entire floor on the Star Apartments dedicated to recreational and wellness uses for not just the residents [at the Star] but also the 1,500 individuals who live in our portfolio within the surrounding mile,” Trujillo says. “It has ground-floor commercial, which is more community and health driven, including the offices for the [Los Angeles County Department of Health Services’] Housing for Health Division. It’s going to have its headquarters located on the ground floor of the Star Apartments, and then [DHS] will also operate the clinic that’s also located at the site.”

Permanent supportive housing initiatives differ from many other affordable housing efforts in that the permanent initiatives plan and sustain the housing and welfare of residents over the long term. In many cases, affordable housing initiatives focus on rehabilitative programs intended to get those in need in a state of self-sufficiency in the short term. According to Trujillo and multiple studies, this system does not work well much of the time.

“There’s this perception that when you get people off the street, they will stabilize their lives and be able to enter back into the workforce,” Trujillo says. “But when you’re serving chronically homeless individuals, that’s only true for a very small percentage. The majority of people who come into our apartments are in need of intensive services. Some of that declines over time, but there is always a need for ongoing services and rental subsidy in perpetuity while they’re residing in our units.”

Taking this approach can be challenging, as the Skid Row Housing Trust needs to consider costs that last much longer than the typical affordable housing setting. The trust also must find ways to work with a population that’s not always welcomed into communities.

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CONTINUING STRONG GROWTH

After 25 years, the Skid Row Housing Trust has stayed true to its roots in affordable housing, while adapting to additional needs the Trust has identified. Firmly committed to serving chronically homeless and those that are most vulnerable, the organization’s leadership wants to see the model created go beyond the Skid Row neighborhood.

“It saves the government and the taxpayers a lot of money to take really sick individuals who are living on the street and put them into permanent supportive housing because their reliance on various public agencies and services declines significantly,” Trujillo says. “We want to show other jurisdictions that you can do really great mixed-use, mixed-user buildings that integrate well into your community. Our goal is to really increase our capacity for the next five years.”

- Dana Trujillo