Historic Hotel Offers Homeless Remedy

Popular Elsewhere, L.A. Slow to Adopt Permanent Supportive Housing Model

By Anat Rubin
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LOS ANGELES — Nanette Boone remembers how she talked out loud to herself and stopped taking showers or combing her hair.

"People used to walk by me, and they wouldn't even see anybody," Boone said. "I used to just be blank."

Over the past three years, Boone has been transformed from that unwashed, emotionally unstable homeless woman to someone who likes to socialize, cook and "participate in life."

"When people look at me today," she said, "they would never know that I have been diagnosed a paranoid schizophrenic and a manic-depressive, unless I stopped taking my medication." St. George resident Nanette Boone said. For more photos of the St. George and its residents, go to www.dailyjournal.com.

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Homeless advocates say the St. George is eloquent testimony to the effectiveness of permanent supportive housing as a way to combat chronic homelessness. Boone, they say, is an example of what can be achieved when the right services are put together under one roof.

Although the St. George is praised nationwide, advocates say it doesn't enjoy the same support at home. As the federal grant that pays for its supportive services runs out, it will have to compete for scarce city and county funding.

Studies show that 40 percent of the homeless population in Los Angeles County is considered chronically homeless, higher than in any other metropolitan region.

This population is often too mentally ill or strung out on drugs to voluntarily use existing services.

Civic leaders frequently call these people "service-resistant." Housing advocates say that characterization has been used to justify law enforcement solutions to the city's homeless problem at a time when both city and county should be focusing on increasing services.

"A punitive solution doesn't work, and every time it's been tried, it's failed," said Phil Mangano, executive director of the U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness. "We understand that housing with full resources works."

The St. George's services are voluntary. Mike Alvidrez, executive director of the Skid Row Housing Trust, the nonprofit that operates the St. George, said all of the residents use at least one service, most of them two or three.

"You have to engage people in such a way that they want those services," he said. "The key is having the support services on-site. If you can provide the services, it works. We just have to prove it here. We have to prove gravity exists here just like it does in the rest of the world, just like it does in New York and San Francisco."

Those cities have shifted their services to the "housing first" model, using housing as a first step to recovery, rather than as a reward for enrolling in mental health and drug addiction services.
The St. George Hotel provides housing and support services for formerly homeless people with disabilities. The restoration and renovation of the 1904 building, just steps off Los Angeles’ Skid Row, was extensive.
These cost-benefit studies have been completed in most major cities across the country, but Los Angeles is yet to conduct its own.

"There's no question that what is currently on the books for the number of homeless in this country is cost-benefit analysis," Mangano said.

In some cities, one chronically homeless person on the street can cost more than $100,000 per year, he said. The cost of a night in a Los Angeles hotel room is $81. A night in a mental hospital is $600, according to a study by the Corporation for Supportive Housing. A night in a supportive housing resource is $39.

In her three years at the St. George, Boone hasn't been to an emergency room or to jail once. The acquisition and operation of the St. George was extensive. The 67-bed building, built in 1994, was once the tallest building east of Main Street, and was part of a thriving downtown.

Like most of the downtown emergency hotels, it fell into severe disrepair as residents moved to the Skid Row Housing Trust worked with an architect to undo decades of neglect while maintaining a beds-occupancy character. It cost close to $10 million.

Support services cost $7,000 per person per year.

Residents of the 86-bed facility have access to a case manager, a nurse, a psychiatrist and a doctor, all inside the building. These staff members help residents take their medications and give them access to myriad other services, including drug and alcohol treatment. They find work for the few who are able and disability benefits for those who are not.

Service providers wonder why the county has been slow to recognize that on-site services are the only way to really help the chronically homeless.

The St. George "is probably one of the few successful models of permanent supportive housing in Southern California," Horan said. "People who live over the county come to view this program," she said. And we're talking about $450,000 a year to sustain it, which is peanuts and will keep all these people off the street.

But getting the funds, Horan said, "has been a nightmare." "We have been starved of any services dollars because the city and county have provided zero dollars," she said.

The Housing Trust operates 20 properties in the Skid Row area. Of those, only two have what AlVIDrez calls "the adequate level of services: the newly opened Rainbow Apartments and the St. George.

When Boone, 43, moved into the St. George in 2004, she was "very ill," said her psychiatrist, Vera Muench, who spoke with Boone about her with permission.

"She was terrified," Muench said. Boone lived in fear of being dragged away with this red wig. She scratched her wig, and it came off, and she had a stroke of terror. She said, "I had to do it or I would have been dragged by my hair. That's what the voice said."* After her parents and 7-month-old son died in a car accident in 1997, Boone had a breakdown. It wasn't her first. She had been diagnosed with paranoid schizophrenia and other mental health issues.

But this time, there was no one left to take care of her when she was released.

For years, she drifted in and out of hospitals, jails and prisons, and some of those hospitals and jails before someone from the Skid Row Housing Trust of Sixth and San Pedro streets brought her to the recently renovated St. George. "When I first got here, I used to ask my neighbor, you know, ‘Can you come in with me to make sure no one was hiding in there. I used to ask her to check the showers, you know, ‘Is someone in there.’"

The St. George received a federal Chronic Homeless Initiative Grant to pay for services, and that grant runs out in the next few months and, with it, the services that have helped Boone get her life back.

Although Muench is a county psychiatrist, her services, too, are gone.

Marvin Southard, director of the county Department of Mental Health, said that, when the health grant runs out, Muench's services "will still be available to the Skid Row community in what capacity, I don't know."

Likely, he said, her position will be transferred to the Downtown Mental Health Clinic.

He said the county is looking for ways to "try to maintain a kind of services in the right places."

The downtown clinic, according to Muench, is overcrowded and understaffed. Patients there have to wait in line for hours and rarely see the same doctor twice.

Muench said a majority of her patients used to be in state mental hospitals and need the on-site care they receive at the St. George.

"We are like a very concerned family, and we make sure they take their medication," she said.

The county was forced to issue a "housing first" model, despite successes elsewhere and despite Mangano's warning that it will have a difficult time competing for federal grants unless it takes this approach. In fact, several permanent supportive housing programs, including two proposed projects by the Housing Trust, lost $12 million in federal funding in 1997. The cuts, which came at a time when the federal Housing and Urban Development Department increased, apparently resulted from the city's inability to leverage federal money with local resources.

Last year, in a much-lauded move, the mayor's office allocated $100 million in new affordable housing funds to the Skid Row Housing Trust fund. Half of that will go to permanent supportive housing.

Advocates said they were happy to hear the city finally earmarked funds for permanent supportive housing and that the plan's restrictions would have made building a place like the St. George impossible.

The mayor's plan requires that all permanent supportive housing units for persons who are chronically homeless have a private bathroom and kitchenette. Although the plan didn't include more older residents, permanent supportive housing developers say this requirement is too difficult.

Most of Los Angeles' permanent supportive units are in refurbished residential hotels. At the St. George, most residents have a private toilet, some also have a shower and kitchenette, and some, like Boone, have only a sink.

Mercedes Marquez of the Housing Department said she does not question the success of St. George, but to her, the housing is not permanent without private facilities. She said residents are just as willing to move out of the house when they have their own bathroom and kitchenette.

"The responsibility is to think beyond a single building," Marquez said. "To think about the whole community, you point to a building and say, 'This works here.'"

But advocates say that the right amount of services, not necessarily private amenities, will keep people in housing.

Some homeless advocates believe Los Angeles' restriction ondevelopments is due to "out of pressure from the business community to keep additional affordable housing and homeless services out of downtown."

Most of the city's existing residential hotels are downtown, where affluent renters have turned parts of Skid Row into prime real estate. Some city officials say the area has too high a concentration of homeless services, and advocates say it has influenced the Housing Department's policy.

"That leads me to believe that's not the case," she said. She said permanent supportive housing developers could acquire and refit unused hotel rooms in Los Angeles, as long as they reduce the number of units to accommodate private bathrooms and kitchenettes, which would cost an additional $20,000 per unit.

"Advocates agree that new permanent supportive housing construction should include amenities like a bathroom and kitchen, but also note that residents have more independence."

But when the city is losing far more services, it will be hard to build each year, she said, reducing existing residency units, where the cycle of low-income people, will simply leave more people out on the street.

"I have no idea what to do, but I'm lucky," one woman said she knows she is.

"I'm just glad to be on the inside looking out," she said.

In the wishful hope of buildings like the St. George being available on those streets, another woman on the street looking like I used to look. I try to talk to her. I try to tell her about the Skid Row Housing Trust. She said, "This is my safe haven. This building saved my life."