

Getting mentally ill off skid row

Lamp Community offers hope - and permanent supportive housing - to L.A.'s mentally disabled homeless

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When 32-year-old Tavia Hopkins showed up at the Lamp Community six years ago, she had been using drugs since she was 13. She'd also been homeless for about three years, staying mostly in abandoned buildings, and in and out of jail the last couple. Somewhere along this rough life road, she also lost custody of her three children.

First, staff at the Los Angeles day center talked her away from the demons she kept seeing. They got her a place to stay at the Weingart Center and would even walk her back across skid row to her room. Later, when she got out of recovery programs, they'd find and pay for rooms in motels and, eventually, helped her obtain Section 8 subsidized housing.

Now, after four years living on her own, Hopkins works as a medical assistant in the Homeless Health Care Los Angeles' needle exchange program. Last March she earned a substance abuse certificate from Cal State LA and is working on getting an LVN (Licensed Vocational Nurse) license.

But best of all, she has regained custody of her 16-year-old son and joint custody of her 13- and 12-year-old daughters.

"So I really appreciate Lamp because they taught me how to love myself when I didn't love myself at all," Hopkins says. "I didn't know what I wanted

to do. I had lost my kids, so I didn't care about anything.

"Coming here helped me figure things out," she adds. "It changed my life."

The program that radically altered Tavia Hopkins' life involves what's called "wraparound" or "whatever it takes" social, occupational and medical services. Typically, that means permanent housing supported by job training and help finding a job, substance abuse counseling and peer groups like Alcohol Anonymous, mental and physical healthcare, money management and household budgeting assistance, and, perhaps, even tips on grocery-buying.

Total cost for housing and support services comes to only about \$16,000 per person.



LAMP COMMUNITY - Staff and members get together at agency's headquarters on skid row. Clockwise from top left: Alicea Polk, program manager of AB 2034, Casey Horan, executive director, Taviah Hopkins and Pamela

Back East, cities like New York and New Haven have been using this comprehensive approach to lessen homelessness on the street for years. But here in the Southland - where Los Angeles County has the dubious distinction of being the nation's homeless epicenter with a 2007 headcount of nearly 74,000 homeless men, women and children - supportive housing is barely off the ground.

And last August, Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger cut already meager funds, slashing from California's 2007-2008 budget a \$55 million program that since 1999 has helped 13,000 mentally ill homeless individuals like Hopkins radically change their lives, too.

Under intense lobbying from homeless advocates, however, state Department of Mental Health officials announced unexpectedly in September that \$64 million from unspent administrative funds would now go to counties for mental health care. The funds were generated by the passage of Proposition 63 in 2004, which levied an additional 1 percent tax on incomes of \$1 million or more for mental health services, and is now known as the "Mental Health Services Act" or simply AB 2034.

"It looks like the new funds are going to be used to insure that there's no interruption in our services for this fiscal year," reports Casey Horan, executive director of Lamp. "But it really is dire, because this is just a one-time stopgap measure. Certainly, there's

going to be no way to identify money like that on an annual basis. So it needs to come out of the state budget as it always has.

"This is a remarkable, remarkable program. Lamp, in fact was the template for the Mental Health Services Act," she continued. "AB 2034 is really customer driven, allowing the men and women who are living with a mental illness and are homeless to make decisions about their own lives. And it makes sure that housing is the top priority.

"It's dramatically reducing incarcerations and emergency room visits and hospital visits," she stressed. "It's keeping people housed. And virtually all of these people have been long-term homeless people living with a mental illness or have been recently released from jail or institutions."

The Lamp template does stand out among the hodgepodge of emergency shelter and long-term transitional programs that serve the homeless here in Southern California.

Recognizing that an estimated half of the chronically homeless population suffers from a severe mental or physical disability, Lamp specializes in serving this disenfranchised group. Where many other skid row agencies turn away these terribly damaged and marginalized individuals, Lamp actually seeks them out.

Moreover, going against the guidelines used by most other shelters, clients aren't required to be "clean and sober," to have no felony convictions, to have never failed another recovery program, to not be in current crisis or have multiple challenges, or to have some source of income.

Permanent supportive housing means just that. Members of the Lamp Community are members for life, no matter how many times they fall off the proverbial wagon. And supportive services last a lifetime as needed.

Housing, in fact, is the key.

Since the early years of its founding on skid row's San Julian Street in 1985, the organization's bedrock premise has remained unchanged - Mentally ill people are more likely to succeed in treatment when they have a stable home. And even severely mentally ill people, when given the proper services, supports and opportunities, can achieve housing stability.

"We just take all those rules and requirements of most shelters, and just throw them out the window," Horan says. "Our goal is to get and keep people housed. So we say, 'We're ready. Let's move forward and try to get you housing as quickly as possible.'

"And then what happens is people begin to trust us. They begin on their own terms and at their own pace to get involved in the community and reunite with family members and get treatment. So these people become unrecognizable."

Lamp's housing options provide different levels of support and structure, including subsidized apartments, long-term motel units, single room occupancy units (SROs), a community residence called The Village housing 50 homeless mentally ill people along with a day center called Safe Haven.

The public- and private-funded agency provides permanent supportive housing to residents of some 200 furnished apartments with clinical and supportive services built in. Four hundred more people receive housing placement, rental subsidies and lifelong services. Last year, more than 1,000 men and women, who had been living on the street for as long as 15 years, were served.

The Lamp Community, which boasts one of the highest success rates in the nation for ending homelessness, reports that 85 percent of its "members" remain housed long-term.

Before Pamela Green came to Lamp, she was sleeping on the ground even when it rained. Then she learned how to make a tent out of boxes. The 47-year-old woman was on skid row's horrendous streets for a dozen years.

"It was very, very scary 'cause you don't know what you're going to do day to day," she explains. "You don't know what you're going to eat. You don't know how you're going to get high.

"You don't know how you're going to, you know, sleep. Is it going to be just a blanket tonight or you've got to get boxes, because everybody on the street goes to the stores to get boxes and makes tents. And you don't want to go inside a shelter because they have bugs in the shelter beds and too much stuff to deal with."

Lamp helped Green get a large hotel room, with her own bathroom. She stayed there four years. Five months ago they found her an apartment. At first, she suffered housing shock.

"I didn't know what it was like to have an apartment and now I have one," she notes. "It's like you don't want to come outside. I have cable TV. I have a telephone in my room. I can cook anything I want on my stove. I can get in the tub and soak, or I can just get in the shower and wash off."

With her permanent supportive housing funded by AB 2034, there's also an array of wraparound services, including money management, alcohol and drug recovery services, plus health care.

"I'm paying my bills through SSI [Supplemental Security Income] disability; and if I have a problem, I can ask Lamp and they'll help you out," she reports.

"But so far, I haven't had no problems with paying bills. And you can tell Lamp anything, and they still give you help anyway. I still have a problem with drugs," she acknowledges.

After a moment, a smile of hope creases the once-homeless woman's weathered face. "It's just all wonderful," she says, knowing Lamp will be there for support over the long haul.