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Havens for Hard-ups

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WHY IS IT THAT SOME homeless people get off the streets within a few weeks while others remain there year after senseless year? The disheartening answer is that the majority of the chronically homeless are mentally ill, addicted to drugs or both. And too often they refuse help because service providers demand that they first agree to follow rules requiring them to remain sober, take medication or attend prayer services.

Lamp Community in downtown Los Angeles has a different idea. Clean, bright and worlds away from the chaos of skid row outside its front door, the center is one of only two “safe haven” shelters in the region to target the chronically homeless who are mentally ill. It’s a place short on rules and long on services. Residents come and go as they please, taking or leaving the generous supply of mental health and substance abuse programs on site. They can stay for 10 days or 10 years, though the goal is to coax them into permanent housing as soon as possible.

Sounds like a soft-touch approach, but the community’s morning meetings tell a different story. Earlier this week at 9 a.m. sharp, 15 residents sat in a circle and talked house business, making communal decisions with the efficiency of a well-trained sales team. One needed help getting a new state ID card. Another wanted to know where the house’s community barbecue would be held later in the week. The group agreed to put off a vote on a rule about nightly curfews until more residents could weigh in. A vote? Community BBQs? These are people who just weeks ago lived in bedlam and slept under freeways.

“Safe havens” cost about \$20,000 a year per resident, paid for by local, state and federal tax dollars, along with some private foundation money. That may sound like a lot, but consider that the average long-term homeless person costs local taxpayers an estimated \$40,000 a year in services.

And the two local “safe havens” – Lamp Community and Ocean Park Community Center in Santa Monica – report that about two-thirds of their residents successfully move on to permanent housing.

Some people believe that the chronically homeless are treatment-resistant bums who relish the “freedom” of living as they want. The reality is that treatment centers may too often resist them.