

# Daily Journal

## Historic Hotel Offers Homeless Remedy

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

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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. If I get off my medication, I'll go back to being that same person. And I don't ever want to see that person again."

Boone's transformation began when she was given a room at the St. George Hotel, a permanent supportive housing facility paces from Los Angeles' Skid Row. With that room came support services, including access to a psychiatrist.

The St. George is filled with people like Boone, often referred to as the chronically homeless, who had been living on the street for years or had a dual diagnosis of mental illness and drug addiction. Today, they participate in weekly activities, cook meals together and learn how to live with what could be crippling illnesses.

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 old model, which most cities have done away with, said you need to earn the right to housing," said Casey Horan, director of LAMP Community, a Skid Row nonprofit providing housing and support services.

"That model created a chronically homeless population disenfranchised from all services."

Services should be provided in housing, "not on the street where people are living in squalor and can't make these kinds of dramatic transitions," she said.

The St. George doesn't require sobriety and doesn't force its residents to take medications as a condition for housing.

"Supportive housing is a prerequisite for coping with the challenges of homelessness, addiction, mental illness and HIV/AIDS," Horan said. "People with a mental illness are suspicious of medication. But these people, if they are housed, within three weeks they will be seeing a psychiatrist and taking meds."

Permanent supportive housing is also cheaper than leaving the chronically homeless in a desperate cycle of emergency-room visits and jail stints, homeless advocates say.

Studies in San Francisco showed that the care of one chronically homeless individual cost the city an average of \$62,000 a year in emergency hospital care and jail. Permanent supportive housing, including treatment and care, would cost only \$16,000 per year.

These cost-benefit studies have been completed in most major cities across the nation, but Los Angeles is yet to conduct its own.



Anthony Armstrong, a 54-year-old Vietnam veteran, became homeless after his wife died and he was diagnosed with spinal arthritis that left him hunched over and unable to work. "I couldn't straighten up," he said. "But look at me now."

"There's no question that what is driving political will on the issue of homelessness 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 emergency room is \$1,500. A night in a mental hospital is \$600, according to a study by the Corporation for Supportive Housing. A night in a supportive housing residence is \$30.

In her three years at the St. George, Boone hasn't been to an emergency room or to jail once.

The acquisition and rehabilitation of the St. George was extensive. The hotel, built in 1904, was once the tallest building east of Main Street in the heart of a thriving downtown. Like most of the downtown residency hotels, it fell into severe disrepair as downtown residents moved to the suburbs. The Housing Trust worked with an architect to undo decades of neglect while maintaining the building's 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 medication on time 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, they say, to help the chronically homeless.

The St. George "is probably one of the most celebrated models of permanent supportive housing in Southern California," Horan said. "People from all over the country 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 service 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 an appropriate 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 Muensch, who spoke about Boone with her permission.

"She was terrified," Muensch said. "She was sitting in front of me with this red wig. She scratched her wig, and it came off, and she had a shaved head underneath. She said, 'I had to do it or I would have been dragged by my hair.' That's what the voices told her."



Deborah Stom, whose nickname is Sky, sits among the toys and decorations in her room. Her favorite thing about living at the St. George, she said, is the social atmosphere. "We have a party every Friday with our nurse, Irma," Stom said. "She cooks food, and we watch a movie. She's a really good friend."

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 spent some time in a mental institution. 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 shelters, encampments, hospitals and jails before someone from the Skid Row Housing Trust found her on the corner of Sixth and San Pedro streets and brought her to the recently refurbished St. George just as it was opening as a permanent supportive housing facility.

"When he found me, I hadn't brushed my teeth in months," Boone said. "I thought, if I started smelling bad, nobody would bother me."

The St. George staff put Boone on a routine medication regimen.

"Now I have a key to a door no one else is behind," Boone said. "When I first got here, I used to ask my neighbor to come into my room with me to make sure no one was hiding in there. I used to ask her to check the shower before I went in."

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

Although Muensch is a county psychiatrist, her services, too, are covered by the federal grant.



Irma Gladney, a registered nurse, is at the St. George four days each week. She makes sure the residents take their medication, even knocking on doors if they don't show up in her basement office.

Marvin Southard, director of the county Department of Mental Health, said that, when the grant runs out, Muensch'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 "put the right kind of services in the right places."

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

Muensch 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 city, too, has resisted a "housing first" model, despite successes elsewhere and despite Mangano's warning that Los Angeles will have a difficult time competing for federal grants unless it takes this approach.

In fact, several Los Angeles supportive housing projects, including two proposed projects by the Housing Trust, lost \$12 million in federal rental subsidies in February. The cuts, which came at a time when the federal Housing and Urban Development budget increased, apparently resulted from the city's inability to leverage federal money with local support services.

Last year, in a much-lauded move, the mayor's office allocated \$100 million annually to an affordable-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 but dismayed to find 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 built with money from the trust have a private bathroom and kitchenette. Although the plan officially does not forbid using residency hotels, permanent supportive housing developers say this requirement precludes them.

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 the St. George but insists that housing is not permanent without private facilities. She said residents are more likely to stay in housing if they have their own bathroom and kitchenette.

"My responsibility is to think beyond a single building," Marquez said. "It's to think about the whole city. You can always 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 on residential units is the result 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.

Private developers and city officials say the area has too high a concentration of homeless services, and advocates believe they influenced the Housing Department's policy.

Marquez said that's not the case. She said permanent supportive housing developers could acquire and refurbish residency hotels 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.



Psychiatrist Vera Muensch's door is open every Wednesday for the residents. "If they need to be seen, they can walk in," Muensch said. "Like any chronic illness, like arthritis, schizophrenia comes and goes. If these people could keep their appointments, they wouldn't need this program."

Advocates agree that new permanent supportive housing construction should include amenities like a bathroom and kitchenette so residents have more independence.

But when the city is losing far more affordable housing than it's building each year, they say, reducing existing residency units, where thousands of low-income people live, will simply leave more people out on the street.

Boone said she knows she is lucky.

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

But she wishes more buildings like the St. George were available for those on the street.

"If I see 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."



Anthony Armstrong and Deborah Stom, standing on the St. George patio, are good friends. "This is like my family here," Armstrong said. "We help each other out."