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Seattle project puts housing first, saves lives and money

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An attractive blue and gray apartment building with views of the Space Needle saved taxpayers \$4 million in one year - simply by giving hardcore homeless alcoholics a place to live.

This home for the homeless has attracted visitors from across the country looking for ways to move the most seriously ill off the streets and cut costs. But it has detractors because it doesn't require residents to stop drinking.

The \$11 million project is one of the country's best-known examples of housing first, an approach to combating chronic homelessness by providing homes upfront and offering help for illnesses and addictions. The concept turns the traditional model, which typically requires sobriety before a person can get housing, upside down.

"It flat-out works," said once-skeptical Ron Sims, a former King County, Wash., executive who now serves as deputy secretary of U.S. Housing and Urban Development. "If this could be replicated, we'd move into hundreds of millions of savings."

That is a big if, given the moral objections to such a project, not to mention the likely opposition of nearby residents. Then there's politics. Even those who champion the homeless say controversy over such a facility could hamper their efforts to create more housing.

Residents at 1811 Eastlake, the project's name and address, say they are grateful for their clean, quiet home in a vibrant downtown Seattle neighborhood only a mile and a half from the Space Needle.

"It's great," said John Whiteplume, who used to spend many nights at Seattle's detox center. "I've got a family here."

Before moving into the building, homeless men and women made repeated visits to hospitals and jail that cost taxpayers \$8.1 million a year. Those expenses were slashed in half after they got into 1811 Eastlake.

Seattle has long had a reputation as a leader in tackling the toughest homeless cases, though a housing shortage still leaves out plenty of people.

The Downtown Emergency Service Center, a nonprofit that runs 1811 Eastlake, has a philosophy that housing is a right and people have a better chance of recovering without the chaos of homelessness.

Counselors, nurses and caseworkers are on duty to help residents. But they do not force anyone into treatment.

"We call it romancing people into service relationships," said Bill Hobson, the executive director.

And, he said, it's a courtship that can take years. "You'll get much further and the change will last much longer if you persuade people to do things."

The nonprofit avoids clinical-sounding group meetings in favor of Natural High, which offers alternatives to substance abuse, or Feel Free to Bingo, where residents can talk about their problems.

That approach has had some success. Some residents have stopped drinking, despite the lack of any requirement to abstain. Many have cut back.

University of Washington researchers found that residents of 1811 Eastlake reduced their drinking, although the amounts they drink still may sound startling. The median number of drinks dropped from 15.7 per day before moving in, to 10.6 drinks a day after a year in housing.

Built in 2005, 1811 Eastlake has 49 small, one-room apartments and 26 beds in cubicles for those needing closer medical attention.

There are no immediate residential neighbors, a plus for this type of project. Interstate 5 and another major road border the building on one side. Around the corner are a trophy shop and a hotel.

"It's a good neighborhood. Nobody bothers you or nothing," said Nathaniel Porter, who moved in nearly two years ago.

The apartments feel more like a convalescent home than the party house critics envisioned.

Several residents have had amputations and use wheelchairs or canes. Some are missing teeth and have head injuries from falling while they lived on the streets.

The tenants, typically middle-age men, have serious health problems related to alcoholism, including liver disease, kidney problems and seizure disorders. All had failed numerous attempts at treatment.

About 60 percent have mental illnesses in addition to their addictions. One in five is a military veteran.

Residents must follow just two rules at 1811 Eastlake: no violence and pay your rent.

Rent is based on the tenant's income, which often includes disability or Veterans Affairs checks.

Unlike many housing providers, the managers don't reject people for having criminal records, drug problems or a history of not taking medication.

But allowing alcoholics to drink in government-subsidized homes continues to anger critics like Robb Anderson, who co-owns Northwest Trophy & Awards Inc. next door and was a party in an unsuccessful legal effort to block the project.

Anderson said some - but not all - 1811 Eastlake residents loiter, drink, vomit on his steps, pass out in the flowerbeds and urinate behind the Dumpster in his parking lot.

"Every day I see them walking with beers, barely walking to where they can't stand," he said.

He said the project seems like a hospice.

"I'm not behind a place that allows them to not have to do anything to get better," he said.

Hobson has heard similar complaints, but he said leaving chronic alcoholics on the streets costs the city more.

"It's an irrational use of the public purse, and it's driven by this tendency to judge these guys," he said.

At first, the offer of a home, with few strings attached, sounded too good to be true to many of the residents, Hobson said. But he said he only had to make 79 offers to fill 75 spots, dispelling the myth that homeless people like living under bridges and in cardboard boxes.

"I had two refusals: They said, 'You're (kidding) me,' " he said.

One recent evening, about a dozen residents, many cheerfully intoxicated, gathered in the sunny, spick-and-span dining room. An employee dished up the evening meal: pasta and vegetables donated by a local charity. Residents sat at the tables and quietly watched TV or chatted while they ate.

Porter said he'd still be on the streets, drinking heavily, if it weren't for 1811 Eastlake. Now, he said, he takes medication for schizophrenia, which helped him stop drinking.

The 50-year-old loves having his own key.

"It's nice to have a place to live, a roof over your head," he said. He goes downstairs for meals and to talk to his counselor, but mostly, he keeps to himself. "Once I got my place, I've been into my TV."

Freddie Lee Prince, who moved in three years ago, said he "loves everything about this place."

"We're like family around here," he said. "If I die, I want to be stuffed in the wall."

Sims, the No. 2 official at HUD, which funds 1811 Eastlake, said he initially worried that it would enable residents to continue their addiction. But as much as he would like them to quit, Sims said, he became convinced chronic alcoholics would drink whether they had a home or not.

"We cannot continue to fund good intentions," he said. "HUD wants to see models that work."