

Housing for Special Needs Populations: Supportive Services in SRO Hotels

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The SRO Housing Corporation was formed by the Community Redevelopment Agency (CRA) of the City of Los Angeles in February 1984. The new non-profit corporation was given a mission of improving the quality of life in the Central City East, or Skid Row, neighborhood of Los Angeles. The main objective was then, and remains today, the acquisition, renovation, management and maintenance of the existing housing stock. In 1984, there were 63 operating SRO hotels with over 6,000 rooms, constituting virtually the entire housing stock of this 55-square block area.

The Corporation under its governmental sponsor, the Community Redevelopment Agency of the City of Los Angeles (CRA), realized that the Central City East area was so bereft of any sense of community that upgrading the housing was not enough to assure a decent quality of life for those who live, work, and shop in the neighborhood. From its inception SRO Housing's role was seen to be broader than the provision of decent, safe, and sanitary housing at affordable rents. At the time this paper was written base rents ranged from \$195 per month for those on General Relief to \$235 per month for those on Supplemental Security Income (SSI). General Relief in Los Angeles County is currently \$341 per month plus \$105 in food stamps and \$42 bus pass for those assigned to Workfare or to approved education or training programs; SSI ranges from \$630 to \$718 per month.¹

CRA adopted a strategy for SRO Housing to develop parks in the area and to purchase hotels in clusters around those parks. CRA then gave SRO Housing the mission of developing the capacity to manage and main-

tain these parks so they would benefit the neighborhood and the tenants of single-room occupancy hotels. As such, the strategy of grouping hotel purchases in clusters was also based on the concept of extending the area of control from the hotels to the surrounding streets, thereby creating "islands of sanity."

No one who is captive in his or her living unit, no matter how well it is managed and maintained, can lead a decent life. The tenants of SRO Housing's hotels must be free to leave their buildings to shop, seek recreation, socialize with friends who live elsewhere, and to conduct the ordinary business of life. In short, SRO Housing Corporation cannot build a sense of community by concentrating solely on physical, housing quality issues.

The Corporation recognized early in its history that its tenant needs exceeded basic housing needs. The development and management of parks was the first response to those needs. However, a demographic survey conducted in mid-1984 highlighted a range of problems within the population: a large proportion of hotel residents in the area had a history of alcohol and drug abuse; a smaller but significant portion of the hotel population had a history of mental illness; elderly tenants were often victimized by predators and had limited access to services designed to help them; and homeless, indigent men were housed in hotels that were in deplorable physical condition and in which drug use and crime was rampant.

SRO's strategy to deal with this problem was to acquire, renovate, and professionally manage the single room occupancy hotels that comprised virtually 100 percent of the housing stock in the neighborhood. SRO Housing felt that good management practices, especially careful tenant selection, would reduce the number of drug-using and criminally inclined tenants and create a more stable tenant base that would result in safer streets and a better neighborhood.

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Front Facade of the Angelus Inn, a 31-unit special needs hotel serving recovering substance abusers.

The Challenges of Resident Management

The role of the resident manager in an SRO Housing Corporation managed housing facility is broader than a narrowly defined housing management function. Although resident managers are not expected to be social workers, they are expected to care for their tenants' welfare and to identify tenant needs. They help provide for those needs by making knowledgeable referrals to service providers including those employed by the SRO Housing Corporation in its Social Services Division.

To maintain safe buildings and promote a safe environment overall, resident managers must act as a team, observe each other's buildings, and develop their own strategies for assuring the safety of tenants outside as well as inside the buildings. Since cleaner neighborhoods are usually safer neighborhoods, managers must be sure that the facades of their buildings and the sidewalks and streets in front and around their buildings are clean, free of trash, and free of graffiti. SRO has street cleaning capability in its Parks Division, and managers have a responsibility to request services from this unit in the same way they have a responsibility to request services from the Maintenance Division.

Initially, resident managers were expected to carry full responsibility for identification of tenants who needed social service referrals. Information and referral services, case planning and monitoring require intense personal involvement, as well as time. This proved to be too demanding for even the most skillful resident managers. As a result, SRO Housing created six special needs hotels and a Social Services Division. The Social Services Division administers, supervises and develops the services in these special needs hotels. It also advises

resident managers on social services and provides direct services for tenants who are not located in a special needs hotel or whose problems are too complicated for resident managers. This has helped alleviate the demand on resident managers.

Special Needs Hotels

The 1984 demographic survey and tenant profiles helped identify several special needs populations residing in the hotels. SRO Housing has developed seven general population hotels and six hotels for designated special needs groups (see table 1).

The Russ and the Panama Hotels house general population as well as short-term tenants and homeless, indigent men. The Russ also houses non-contagious, active tuberculosis patients in cooperation with the Los

Angeles County Department of Health Services. SRO Housing felt these two properties (290 and 230 units respectively) were too large to foster the sense of community found in other Corporation-owned hotels, which range in size 31 to 72 units. When they were purchased in January 1985, the Russ and the Panama were largely populated by "voucher clients." Because of the size of these hotels and the need of the voucher client for decent, safe, and sanitary short-term housing, it was decided to continue to provide short-term housing, for homeless, indigent men in these two properties.² Eight other hotels purchased by the SRO Housing Corporation were formerly voucher hotels and were converted to permanent housing.

In Los Angeles County, any indigent person has a right to shelter on the same day he or she applies to the Department of Public Social Services (DPSS) for welfare. Voucher clients are housed in residential hotels for short periods while they wait for their first check. There are 115 such hotels throughout the county. The Russ and the Panama are two of the four remaining hotels in the Central City East--Skid Row--neighborhood.

Voucher clients are referred to SRO Housing by DPSS for a period from one to fourteen days. Vouchers are renewed in rare instances, usually when a person's mobility is restricted by an injury. The average length of stay on a voucher is 3.3 days. Voucher clients are issued keys and have access to their rooms on a 24-hour basis. They receive laundry tokens to wash and dry their clothes on-site. Playing cards, games, newspapers and movies are available in the lobby. In addition, SRO Housing provides grooming kits and will make wake-up calls via a buzzer system. A case manager is on-site to help the

A. General Population Hotels		Units
Carlton Hotel		45
Eugene Hotel		55
Florence Hotel		60
Haskell Hotel		38
La Jolla Hotel		53
Regal Hotel		70
Ward Hotel		72
Sub-Total		393

B. Special Needs Hotels	Population Served	Units
Angleus Inn	Recovering Substance Abusers	31
Ellis Hotel	At-Risk Elderly	54
Golden West Hotel	Chronic Mentally Ill	61
Leo Hotel	Recovering Substance Abusers	38
Panama Hotel*	a. Homeless Men	120
	b. Short-Term Tenants	76
Russ Hotel*	a. Homeless Men	180
	b. Active TB Patients	11
	c. Short-Term Tenants	89
Sub-Total		660
Total		1,053

*These hotels also serve general population clients.

Table 1. Hotels Owned and Operated by SRO Housing Corp.

voucher client to meet his needs.

SRO Housing's cost for these services is \$13.50 per person per night. This rate is negotiated between the SRO Housing Corporation and DPSS. It compares favorably with the latest US Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) report, which places the average cost at \$22.00 per person per night in government-supported emergency shelters. In most of these shelters a person sleeps on a pad on the floor or a cot and must leave the shelter a 7:00 A.M. and cannot return until 6:00 P.M.

Two other special needs hotels provide housing for recovering substance abusers. The Leo Hotel (38 units) and Angelus Inn (31 units) are both operated as alcohol-free living environments. Residents of these hotels must have a minimum of six-months verifiable sobriety upon admission and sign a lease which prohibit their use of alcohol or drugs and restricts their visitors to persons who have no alcohol in their system and do not use illegal drugs.

The usual way to verify six months sobriety is the completion of a residential treatment program of at least six months duration. Since opening the Leo Hotel in 1987, SRO Housing has developed close working relationships with area treatment programs. The Leo Hotel and Angelus Inn are the only two permanent housing facilities with sober living environments in downtown Los

Angeles and are important for the treatment community. SRO Housing is also able to gain access to treatment for tenants or employees with alcohol or drug abuse problems.

A third special needs category is the chronically and severely mentally ill, who are housed in the Golden West Hotel (61 units). This hotel requires its tenants to be on the caseload of the Skid Row Mental Health Project of the Los Angeles County Department of Mental Health. It is a transitional housing program funded by the HUD under the Stewart B. McKinney Act. After the transition period of two years, tenants of the Golden West are transferred to permanent housing hotels operated by the SRO Housing Corporation or, in some cases, they are relocated off Skid Row.

Finally, SRO Housing operates the Ellis Hotel (54 units) as permanent housing for at-risk elderly. To be eligible for tenancy, men and women must be 55 years or older. The Ellis Hotel is owned by a limited partnership, with the SRO Housing Corporation as the general managing partner. Under the terms of the 1986 Tax Reform Act as amended, tenants of the Ellis must have income not in excess of 60 percent of the area median. Since SRO Housing's tenants average 22.1 percent of the area median, this restriction has little relevance.

The Ellis Hotel is located adjacent to Gladys Park which is operated by SRO Housing under contract with the City. The Ellis serves a congregate meal for the elderly in its lobby daily. This meal is open to all elderly residents in the neighborhood, not just to Ellis tenants. One of the commercial spaces in the hotel has been converted into a community room for Alcoholics Anonymous, Narcotics Anonymous and Cocaine Anonymous meetings, as well as community forums and a variety of educational and outreach programs. A second commercial space has been converted to a community fitness center that is operated jointly by SRO Housing and the Downtown YMCA.

Social Services

Resident managers have a responsibility to help meet a broad range of tenant needs. To facilitate this effort SRO Housing has developed and published the *SRO Housing Corporation's Social Services Referral Manual*. Managers must become familiar with this manual and use it as a tool to obtain necessary services for their tenants. Only agencies that regularly service Skid Row clients are listed. Managers have the responsibility to update their individual manuals by noting staff and program changes and by adding information that will be useful for future referrals. Such manuals quickly become dated and remain useful only if they are constantly updated.

SRO Housing also provides other tools managers may rely on to help meet the needs of their tenants. The Housing Management Division holds bi-weekly train-

ing sessions for resident managers that include discussions of social and support services. SRO Housing's Social Services Division provides the following additional programs and services:

Project Hotel Alert (PHA) PHA is a program for the elderly operated under contract with the City of Los Angeles' Department of Aging. Persons 60 years of age and older are eligible for services that include daily congregate meals at the Russ and Ellis Hotels.³ Participation in the congregate meal program is not restricted to tenants of SRO Housings' hotels, but is open to all elderly persons from the Skid Row Area. Disabled persons who are residents of these two hotels are also eligible to participate in the congregate meal, regardless of age. Tenants who are shut-in because of permanent or temporary loss of mobility receive home-delivered meals through the Meals on Heels program. Both congregate and home-delivered meals must provide at least 50 percent of the nutritional needs of elderly persons as established by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. There is also a nurse available for health screening and referral as well as routine medical care such as changing dressings. Case management services provide professional needs assessment, case planning, referrals, money management, transportation, recreation, education and more.

Mental Health Managers in SRO Housing's other hotels who suspect that tenants are mentally ill can call on the senior case manager at the Golden West Hotel for assistance in diagnosis and advice on meeting the needs of such tenants. In some cases, tenants will be transferred to the Golden West from other hotels. In other cases, ongoing support will be provided to managers in other hotels to deal with mentally ill tenants. In cases where tenants are transferred from the Golden West to other SRO-managed hotels, a plan should be worked out between the manager and the case worker from the Golden West before transfer, and regular contact is maintained after the tenant is moved.

Emergency Shelter Program The Russ and Panama Hotels are recognized as emergency shelters by the State of California Department of Housing and Community Development (HCD). SRO operates the Emergency Shelter Program under a grant from the State HCD to provide case management services to over 14,000 homeless men each year. Case managers operate out of the lobbies of the Russ and Panama Hotels and provide a range of services, including referrals, transportation, assistance in obtaining identification, and military records.

Homeless Assistance Program (HAP) HAP serves the same population as the Emergency Shelter Program. It is operated cooperatively with a sister Skid Row service agency, Chrysa-

lis. Chrysalis provides employment programs and services. The purpose of this joint program is to provide job readiness workshops and placement into jobs and/or vocational training.

Food Distribution SRO Housing is a member of the Los Angeles Regional Food Bank, through which it has access surplus foods from the U.S. Department of Agriculture as well as locally donated food. SRO Housing makes weekly deliveries to hotels. Managers are then responsible for distribution of food to tenants.

Alcohol and Drug Services The two alcohol-free living communities are managed by recovering alcoholics with long periods of sobriety and a commitment to help others achieve and maintain a sober life. These buildings have Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) meetings for tenants on a regular basis. Some meetings are open to non-tenants of these hotels. In addition, the Drifters AA meeting, which meets seven nights a week and Sunday mornings, is housed in the community room at the Ellis Hotel. The Harbor Light and Safe Harbor alcohol treatment programs of the Salvation Army operate after-care services for graduates of their program who move into SRO Housing Corporation's buildings. It is the policy of SRO Housing to help recovering alcoholics and addicts to maintain their sobriety in all its buildings. If an alcoholic or addict has a slip/s/he is counseled to re-enter treatment. The first time a tenant slips, s/he will be accepted back into the SRO housing network upon satisfactory completion of the residential treatment program. Subsequent relapses are treated case-by-case, but reacceptance after treatment is not automatic.

Recreation In addition to the parks, SRO Housing offers a range of other recreational opportunities for



Elderly meal site at Russ Hotel lobby.



San Julian Park, a one-third acre mini-park in downtown LA, opened July 19, 1986.

tenants. The Downtown YMCA operates a professionally-staffed fitness center with high quality exercise equipment at the Ellis Hotel. This center is open to the community. SRO Housing provides trips to sporting events, theaters, and movies. Resident managers inform tenants of these opportunities, make arrangements, and encourage participation.

Tenant Amenities In addition to the activities described above, managers are expected to arrange minimum of one congregate meal and one birthday celebration each month. The meal should be scheduled late in the month when tenants tend to be low on cash. Managers should review tenant records to be sure that every tenant with a birthday in a given month is recognized at the birthday party. Managers show two movies each night. Coffee is available in the lobby on a regular basis.

SRO Housing continues to seek resources to provide service to its tenants. It has Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) vouchers to house homeless persons who have not obtained a DPSS voucher. It maintains an agreement with the Downtown Lions Club to provide vision care, including examinations, prescription glasses, cataract operations, glaucoma screening and care. SRO Housing has also obtained motorized wheelchairs from the Rotary Club.

SRO Housing also sponsors special events to improve the quality of life in Central City East. Concerts in the park are partially funded by a grant from the City of Los Angeles Cultural Affairs Department; job fairs and health fairs are sponsored in conjunction with other service agencies. Regular neighborhood clean-up campaigns include street and sidewalk cleaning, trash and weed removal from vacant lots, and graffiti removal.

SRO Housing has submitted grant applications for funding to provide advocacy for persons seeking Supplemental Security Income benefits. It is also pursuing

possibilities for special needs housing for persons who are HIV-positive, and transitional housing for recovering alcoholics and addicts.

Conclusions

The SRO Housing Corporation has an advantage in owning and operating a large number of hotels within a relatively small geographic area. Because of its size (currently 14 hotels with 1,174 housing units), SRO Housing is able to meet a variety of special needs. The various programs tend to support each other: for instance, placement of tenants from transitional facilities can be guaranteed when the service provider also controls permanent housing.

Supportive housing does not require placement in a large or diverse organization in order to be successful; however, there are many examples of such housing being operated as a stand-alone facility. There are even cases in which only one floor in a building is designated for use by a special needs population. For example, the Estate Hotel in Portland, Oregon, a four-story building with 156 units, houses recovering alcoholics in an alcohol-free living environment on its top floor. This area is closed off from the rest of the building.

Clearly, single-room occupancy facilities are well-suited to provide a combination of housing and support services. These buildings can include traditional downtown residential hotels, motels on the outskirts of town, and rooming houses. Less obvious structures such as warehouses, convents, schools and hospitals are also often creatively adapted for use as an SRO hotel.

There is a growing tendency to use SROs as sites for housing special needs populations. This trend can be expected to continue to gain momentum from new HUD policies that encourage supportive services as a condition for receiving federal housing subsidies. The experience gained by the SRO Housing Corporation can be a useful model for this expansion of supportive housing throughout the United States. CP

Notes

- ¹ Supplemental Security Income (SSI) is a Federal program, with considerable State enhancements in the case of California, that provides benefits to persons who are disabled or over age 62 who have not qualified for Social Security benefits or whose benefits fall below established minimums. General Relief, in some jurisdictions called General Assistance, is provided for persons awaiting an SSI eligibility determination or who are able-bodied and under age 62 and thus ineligible for SSI.
- ² The Russ and Panama house only men. For the purposes of this article, there is no difference between the terms "voucher clients" and "homeless, indigent men."
- ³ Federal regulations allow persons over age 55 who are members of a Senior Citizen organization to participate in the meal program. All residents of the Ellis Hotel are enrolled in the congregate meal program.