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Design Perspectives: A new approach to housing the homeless: Gossett Place

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Doors opened this month at Gossett Place in the University District. For the tenants, it was more than a moving day. Many were moving off the streets.

There's a couple who say they have been homeless for 18 years in the U-District, sleeping in doorways and sweeping restaurants for food. Now, with basic shelter covered, they can start thinking about a future beyond the next night. One 18-year-old tenant says he has been homeless since he was 14. He camped out at the door of Gossett Place the night before it opened, just to be sure.

Tenants are moving in a handful at a time so the manager on site can help with their transition to housing.



Photos courtesy of Low Income Housing Institute [\[enlarge\]](#)
Gossett Place opened this month in the University District, part of a new crop of housing for the homeless. It's based on the principle of

“housing first,” which makes the case that being housed is more important than any other factor in preventing illness and saving money on emergency services.

The \$15 million project has 53 studio apartments and 10 one-bedrooms, including one for a resident manager. Tenants pay 30 percent of their income for rent. They have access to a computer lab and a large community room, and there is job training and counseling on site.

Most residents are between 18 and 25, and many are veterans. Veterans are over-represented among the adult homeless population, according to Sharon Lee, director of the Low Income Housing Institute, which owns and manages Gossett Place.

The generic six-story brick-and-panel-board apartment building is designed to fit in and be energy efficient. Named after longtime King County councilmember and housing advocate Larry Gossett, it is part of a quiet tide of changes in policy and practice when it comes to the homeless. Housing is spread out among different neighborhoods, neighbors are more accepting, funding is better coordinated, and housing is more effectively linked with services — at least here in Seattle, where there is a strong network of government agencies and private nonprofits like LIHI that work full time to house low-income and homeless people.

Bill Block is project director for the Committee to End Homelessness, a regional coalition hosted by King County and dedicated to pulling funds together to house the homeless. The 62 units at Gossett Place are among 4,500 opened or in the pipeline since the Committee to End Homelessness released its 10-year plan, titled “A Roof Over Every Bed,” in 2005. The goal is to reach 9,500 units.

Coordinated effort

The coalition's funding comes from private, nonprofit and government sources. It has helped an estimated 30,000 individuals into housing, from full-support to market-rate, according to Block. At the same time, he counts another 18,500, or 5,500 households, that the coalition has helped to stay housed. That involves a number of simple, low-cost strategies like writing a check for first and last month's rent on an apartment.

Coordinated effort is what's necessary to meet the rising tide of youth, single adults, families and seniors who face the loss of their

homes or are already on the streets, Block said. Government funding cuts at every level, combined with the impacts of the recession, have put more and more people into poverty or cut them out of low-cost housing.

The un-housed are in virtually every neighborhood. They are mostly invisible — sleeping in parked cars, riding the bus all night, camped in bushes or under bridges.



[\[enlarge\]](#)

Most residents of Gossett Place are between 18 and 25, and many are veterans.

You may think ending homelessness is not possible in our lifetimes, but the numbers show it is declining. Volunteers count them every January — including people in shelter beds — and have found that despite hard times, there was a 4 percent decrease in King County in 2010 and an 11 percent reduction this year. Over the same amount of time, there have been documented increases in other cities, according to Block.

It's impossible to say whether the people no longer sleeping in doorways and under bushes in Seattle are among the 18,500 helped into apartments in the last five years, but it's hard to explain any

other way.

The efforts of Block, Lee and countless others who have been working in the housing sector, or contributing money to the effort, have been aided by the growing political will to provide housing.

Put housing first

Housing First is a way of thinking about homelessness that's gained credibility over the last decade. Basically the idea is that giving homeless people keys to their own apartments produces a net savings to taxpayers and service providers in the form of reduced emergency room trips and other costs.

It's been steadily overtaking the old "housing readiness" approach, which held that housing should wait until certain standards — like sobriety — are met.

There are many challenges in providing the basic day-to-day safety and certainty of a room in a managed building like Gossett Place. But the old excuses for not providing them, or not producing them as quickly as possible, just don't hold any more.

Housing First was supported by a Seattle-based study published in 2009 in the Journal of the American Medical Association. It showed that the cost of housing someone among the homeless population produces a net savings of \$2,500 per person housed, per month (in combined services and housing), compared with people on a waiting list for that housing. The savings increase after six months.

Using studies like this, the Downtown Emergency Services Center is leading an effort to convince Washington state legislators to give supportive housing for the homeless a "zero fiscal" note, meaning it has no net cost to taxpayers.

"Getting folks housed and stabilized is far cheaper than having them churn between jails and streets and emergency rooms," said Stephen Norman, director of the King County Housing Authority. "It's better for individuals and better for the community."

Support is building, and local voters have helped. The King County Veterans and Human Services Levy in 2005, provides \$13 million per year for housing and services for veterans and other at-risk groups. It was renewed in August of this year.

What housing providers and advocates already knew was affirmed

with a study this summer that showed housing homeless veterans accounts for as much as a 95 percent decrease in their use of emergency support services. Jail time was included.

“We know what to do,” said Norman, who advocates in Washington D.C. for federal funding for housing. “We have the competencies locally to do it. We know that over time it saves money.”

Block puts it very simply: “Homelessness is traumatic.” Behind those dollars is a huge savings in human misery.

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