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From blight to might

A derelict south Sacramento motel becomes a house and haven for the area's homeless

By [Jimmy Spencer](#)

For years, homeless individuals struggling with addiction needed to sober up before receiving help or housing. But an increasingly popular philosophy of “harm reduction,” where addicts are put into safe environments first and then given assistance—an approach that fundamentally clashes with the traditional Alcoholics Anonymous method of treatment—is taking root here in Sacramento.

This week, for instance, local nonprofits will unveil Boulevard Court, a 74-unit complex and home for those who suffer from mental illness or drug and alcohol addiction. The building, formerly a decrepit Budget Inn on Stockton Boulevard near Fruitridge Road, will provide permanent housing, along with on-site social services, counseling and support.

Advocates of this approach argue that recovery starts with the little things, such as a shower and a toilet, a kitchen for cooking and clean clothes. The ability to kick up one's tired feet in a safe place. The opportunity to collect oneself.

“When you treat homelessness, you treat mental health,” said Jonathan Porteus, chief executive officer of The Effort, one of the nonprofits behind the apartment project. “People with substance-abuse issues are much more respectful of their own property and others when they are living in their home,” he argued.

Requirements to be considered for placement into a unit at the new Boulevard Court apartments are straightforward: All candidates must both suffer from a major mental-health issue and currently be homeless. While criminal records are evaluated on a case-by-case basis, no one with a history of sexual offenses will be offered housing.



The Effort's Jonathan Porteus (left) and Amber Salazar (center) and Janet Shorter at the new Boulevard Court apartments, formerly an old motel, soon to be future home for the homeless.

Photo By Wes Davis

Many residents will live at the apartments either for free or only a small amount of money. Boulevard Court will offer financial assistance and guidance to residents, in addition to helping them acquire documents and rent vouchers at the Health and Human Services.

Once an individual is rehabilitated and potentially has the ability to work a job, that person's rent will be adjusted accordingly—but always with the caveat that it remain affordable. Presently, Porteus says there are 35 housing applications filed with The Effort.

The project is led by a multipronged force consisting of three different nonprofits: The Effort, the Pathways to Success program with Turning Point, and Mercy Housing.

Mercy Housing, a national nonprofit that builds affordable housing for those who can't afford what's available on the market, is the project's developer, landlord and property manager. Both The Effort and Pathways, two Sacramento organizations geared to help those with mental-health and addiction issues, will provide social services for its clients. The Effort will oversee 49 of the units, while Pathways, contracted by Sacramento County, will fill the other 25 units.

The structure at Boulevard Court seeks to provide long-term living and support as a first step in recovering from or coping with mental illness and overcoming addiction. Porteus believes in what he calls a "housing first" method and argues that those in need are more likely to find the road to recovery if they're off the streets.

"These people don't respond to having a home by going in and shooting up the whole time," Porteus said. "They are less stressed and don't turn to drugs or alcohol.



Home-cooked meals are just part of the road to recovery at the Boulevard Court apartments, where those struggling with mental illness and addiction can find permanent housing.

Photo By Wes Davis

"What's more likely to get you in treatment: sitting in a tarp down by the river with a crack pipe, or sitting in your apartment near a counselor?"

The trio of nonprofits has already successfully developed a similar treatment model with Martin Luther King Village, which offers 80 units to former homeless persons on 47th Avenue and Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard.

Pathways program director Alexis Bernard stresses the need to take people who suffer from substance addiction off the street before they can begin recovery. "It's extremely important," she said. "Without having your basic needs met, it's hard to deal with other issues—and sometimes, in the instance of substance abuse, you might be using to protect yourself while on the street.

"Once someone gets their basic needs met, they are ready to start making changes in their lives."

The apartments are the product of a complete renovation of an old motel that was previously a lightning rod for prostitution, narcotics sales and drug use, according to Porteus.

"The community couldn't stand it," he explained of the motel. "It was a real horror." So when the

process began to reconstruct the Budget Inn into permanent housing for the homeless, it was mostly an easy sell—although there still was backlash.

“A lot of people said, ‘You’re just going to have drug addicts and mentally ill people here,’” Porteus recalled. “We were like, ‘Yes. But they are going to [have access to] services.’ We are bringing in support services and a whole different way of managing.”

This support includes nurses and psychiatrists, two clinic exam rooms, case managers and other assistance. If someone has a history of struggling with drugs or alcohol, they can get help right then and there on site.

“It’s not like people will come visit, like a hotel,” Porteus said. “[It’s] a permanent supportive housing project. If someone moves in and they don’t do anything illegal, they will live there as long as they want. It eliminates the transient side of [recovery].”

Stephan Daues with Mercy Housing says there are plenty of successful variations on the housing-first, harm-reduction model. He also added that the Boulevard Court Apartments, created in the mold of MLK Village, won’t let just anyone in who happens to be walking by with a shopping cart; those who end up at the housing complex will have been targeted based on their involvement with prior programs.

Daues says the neighborhood has been very involved throughout the development process and that the project eventually garnered “pretty good support.”

“There was some deep-down conditions of approval that were negotiated,” Daues said, “[but] community members remain engaged.” Daues said that a community-relations committee will meet regularly with local stakeholders to ensure program accountability.

“In general, I do believe the approach of getting people housed in a permanent, independent environment, coupled with intensive support services, will be the most likely path to end the cycle of homelessness,” Daues said. “It is one model of housing that I think every community should provide to give folks an opportunity to be successful.”