

A Model for Supported Independent Living

Message from Eva S. McCraven, President and Chief Executive Officer

Hillview Village, located steps from Hillview Mental Health Center, opened in 1994 as the first San Fernando Valley residential complex offering permanent housing to homeless people with mental illness and providing them ready access to mental health services on the same campus.

Housing and mental health professionals now agree that Hillview Village-type independent living raises wellness rates among homeless mentally ill adults and reduces the use of inpatient services, including detoxification and substance abuse treatment. We've long insisted that when mental health clients have stable homes, they are more able to accept treatment and more willing take responsibility for their recovery. Hillview is unique, however, in having our own clients in Section 8 housing on our own campus.

A friendly and safe community

Hillview Village is home to 49 rent-paying residents who live in studio and one-bedroom apartments. Residents run town hall meetings to address community-living concerns and plan social gatherings. They remind one another that security is everyone's responsibility. They publish their own monthly newsletter. The average condo owner would recognize these activities.

Unlike average condo owners, Village residents organize end-of-month group dinners when money runs low, remind one another to take medications and attend therapy sessions, and tell their case managers when they feel unwell. The resident manager, who is not a mental health professional, collects rent checks, maintains Section 8 compliance records, responds

to everyday emergencies such as lost keys and leaky faucets, meets regularly with case managers, and alerts our staff when residents show signs of instability.

Seems so easy now

That wasn't so in the early 1980s when we envisioned permanent housing at a mental health center. I remember attending a national conference in New York for mental health agencies and housing experts from the private sector and government to talk about combining housing and mental health funding sources. People mostly argued over whether mental health professionals had the business expertise to manage apartments without making too many concessions to their mentally ill residents.

Eventually the federal government became enlightened and began extending funds to counties to house clients in the mental health system.

Hillview had a vacant lot, bought at a bargain-basement price, for which we got high-density zoning approval. We discovered A Community of Friends, a Los Angeles consulting organization that has been developing housing for individuals and families with special needs since 1988. With their guidance and our considerable equity in the property, we got funding for the \$4.3 million project, our investors got tax credits, and Hillview Village got permanent status as Section 8 housing. All that in five years!

We even made our neighbors happy. Our attractive buildings would replace a trash-strewn weed patch and our 24-hour staffing promised to make the neighborhood more secure.



A rocky start

By its nature, Hillview Village was a tough place. We deliberately brought in higher-need clients because we could give them supportive services. These formerly homeless residents were dealing with mental illness and, for some, substance abuse. All were disabled. All were poor. Few grasped that they were living in their own apartments, not treatment centers, and were responsible for their own apartments and the Village community. Some stole everything that wasn't locked or nailed down. Others brought drug use and other illegal activities into the Village.

Still, we believed in the concept. To maintain stability, we moved the worst offenders and kept a close watch for illegal activity. For everyone else, we invested more time and attention. Case managers and therapists emphasized the responsibilities of independent living. The staff provided general mental health education and encouraged residents to use more services next door at the treatment center. Slowly, the residents got it. At town hall meetings they went from barraging me with demands to requesting help in organizing activities that would

Supported Living

continued on next page

encourage cohesion. They began to look at the Village as their own community and their neighbors as individual people—not a group of mentally ill patients.

Wendell Gover became our resident manager 13 years ago. He understood that his job as a business manager included getting to know the residents and serving as a liaison to the clinical staff. Wendell retired this fall and we will miss our friend greatly.

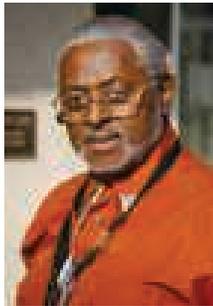
The earliest residents also never rattled Sande Weiss, Hillview Director of Community and Public Relations and our liaison to the Village. She recalls stocking the community kitchen and dining room with microwave ovens and toasters and discovering that within a week each one had “walked out.” Sande is responsible for much of today’s cohesiveness in the Village. She knows everyone because she processes their applications, visits almost daily, organizes community events, and so much more.

Success to savor

We have learned to be good housing managers as well as supportive mental health clinicians. We also accept clients from other mental health agencies on the stipulation that they consent to regular wellness checks by our clinical staff and emergency care treatment, if necessary, and this has worked out very well.

When I talk about the Village, I like to tell my “Peggy Lee story.” I was facilitating a grief therapy session after a death in the Village. Residents talked about how wonderful they felt living in a supportive community. One man, a Village leader who also took an interest in mental health education, declared that he was ready to experience more of the world. He was ready to move on—much to our disappointment. Then I realized something: He was asking Peggy Lee’s question in the song, “Is That All There Is?” He eventually left. He overcame shaky times dealing with money management and attacks of nerves—he’s still our client—but he’s still on his own.

The success of Hillview Village answers the question that our residents ask about their futures: Yes. There is so much more.



Wendell Gover retired last fall after 13 years as Village Resident Manager.



Terri Lomas certainly knows the command for “Action!” Terri is a resident of Hillview Village, holder of a literacy certificate and eight proud years sober. She has worked as a peer counselor and has plans to earn her license as a drug and alcohol counselor. “Hillview saved my life,” she told an interviewer for the Kaiser Permanente Community Benefit Department. “Hillview gave me a life. If not for Hillview, I’d probably be living on the streets, in prison or dead.” Terri volunteered to tell her story in a video about mental health agencies that were assisted by Kaiser Permanente’s Community Service Grant.

Hillview received a three-year grant for \$30,000 to be used primarily for mental health services for people who have no insurance. Terri came to Hillview via the Mentally Ill Offenders program and for years attended group therapy sessions on staying healthy and learning to be self-sufficient. “It clicked in my head that I could fill the hole in my heart by being clean and sober and helping people,” she said, “and not with drugs, alcohol, food and bad relationships.” As a former peer



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advocate, Terri told her interviewer that she understood the challenges of Hillview clients struggling with recovery and was especially effective in helping them. She also led group sessions in relapse prevention, dual diagnosis, reading comprehension, and navigating back to school. Kaiser videographers also chronicled the success stories of Hillview Village residents and lobby greeters David Morey and Sybil Bonsante.