

Skid Row project reaches out to chronically homeless

By Donna Kimura

Los Angeles – The St. George Hotel integrates housing and services to help the most vulnerable residents in the city's Skid Row neighborhood.

The project has 86 single-room occupancy (SRO) units and provides permanent housing for chronically homeless people with mental illnesses or other disabilities. Fifteen units are for those with HIV or AIDS. The apartments are subsidized by the Shelter Plus Care program.

The approximately \$9 million project opened in early 2004 and was leased within a month, according to Mike Alvidrez, executive director of the Skid Row Housing Trust, the non-profit developer. The group operates 19 SRO hotels with 1,175 units of permanent housing.

"We think this is an excellent model for the city and county of Los Angeles to address the tremendous need for more housing," said Alvidrez.

Most residents earn no more than 10% of the area median income, according to officials. They pay 30% of their income in rent under the Shelter Plus Care program.

The St. George is the heart of the Skid Row Collaborative, a federal pilot program that addresses the needs of homeless and disabled individuals through a combined approach of housing and services.

There are on-site case managers, and several service providers, including psychiatric and medical staff, have offices at the project. Communal space is also designed to encourage resident interaction. Residents have access to computers, and computer classes and other programs. The nearby Skid Row Housing

Trust Skills Center offers other training.

In addition to providing much-needed housing, the St. George represents an important neighborhood revitalization project. Built around 1904, the six-story hotel was the tallest building



east of Main Street at the time. The building's proximity to the theater district meant that many performers lived in the hotel during the 1920s. Over time, the St. George became home to seniors and the disabled. It eventually fell into bad shape after years of deferred maintenance.

The development team worked with Richard Barron Architects to retain much of the building's character while meeting the needs of its new residents. As a result, the developers were able to preserve many period details, including glass tiles and signage.

The St. George earned a preservation award from the Los Angeles

Conservancy and a Charles L. Edson Tax Credit Excellence Award from the Affordable Housing Tax Credit Coalition.

The project received approximately \$6 million in equity coming from low-income housing tax credits awarded by the California Tax Credit Allocation Committee. The Enterprise Social Investment Corp. was the tax credit syndicator, and Washington Mutual and Freddie Mac were the investors.

The St. George received a \$685,000 Affordable Housing Program award from the Federal Home Loan Bank of San Francisco through Citibank, \$1 million in soft financing from the Community Development Commission of Los Angeles County, and an approximately \$300,000 soft loan from the Los Angeles Housing Department. The project also benefited from a grant from the Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority. Skid Row Housing also contributed funding.

As a result of the funding structure, the project did not require hard debt.

The St. George was initially purchased with the help of an acquisition loan from the Low Income Investment Fund. ■

St. George Hotel

Developer: Skid Row Housing Trust

Architect: Richard Barron Architects

Contractor: Fassberg Construction

Affordable Units: 86

Unique feature: The project targets chronically homeless individuals with mental illnesses and other disabilities. Fifteen units are for people with HIV or AIDS.