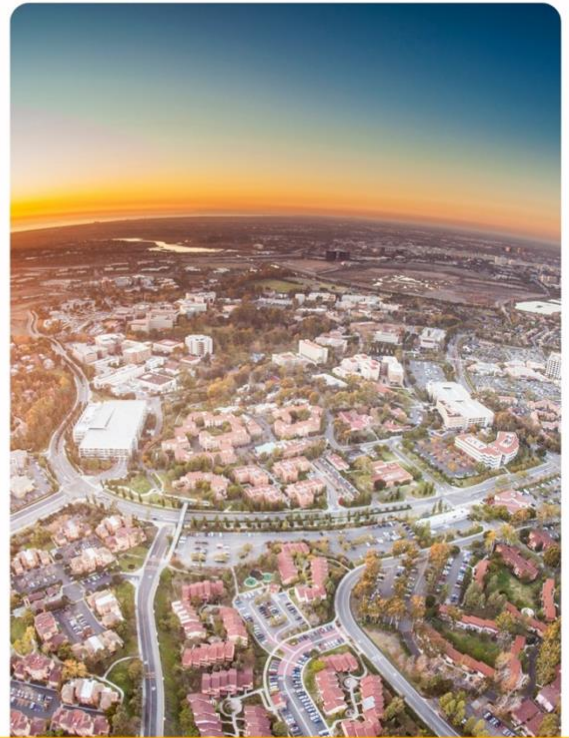


Housing Works LA's Slow Skating: A Supportive Service and Development Process for Long-Term PSH Success

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Background

Permanent Supportive Housing (PSH) is a long-term housing model that combines subsidized housing with supportive services, including mental health and substance use counselling, employment/education help, benefits assistance, and life skills training. In PSH, the responsibilities of service providers are vast, spanning from direct support and community integration to consistent care for those experiencing homelessness with high service needs. Service providers include agencies that provide shelter, outreach, case management, housing assistance, supportive services, and specialized services such as trauma-informed rehabilitation and mental health counselling.

“Slow Skating” is a term the service provider organization Housing Works uses to describe when they take time to ensure their values align with any potential partner before entering contractual agreements with property developers and property managers. The initial months of planning a housing project involve developing a strategy and engaging developers, investors, architects, engineers, and contractors to bring the development to fruition. Since service providers often enter the conversation after the initial planning stages, they must foster intentional relationships with developers (who help build the development) and property managers (who oversee the day-to-day operations). Clients entering PSH often come from long

spells of homelessness and may need extensive supportive services in addition to stable housing. Having clear expectations, roles, and responsibilities for all parties involved in the housing project is essential to providing high-quality care and ensuring tenants' long-term housing stability.

Why Do We Need Slow Skating?

For service providers, slow skating helps avoid miscommunication and enables a clear understanding before signing contracts, in which they agree to take on a given housing site. This approach was inspired by Mollie Lowery, a champion for affordable housing, who sought partnerships with developers who valued collaborative service relationships during the early years of Housing Works, working frequently with partners such as Hollywood Community Housing Corporation (HCHC). Housing Works LA is a nationally recognized service agency that stands at the forefront of innovative strategies to confront homelessness. Their housing and service offerings are modeled after their core organizational values, centered on creating communities for vulnerable individuals through affordable, sustainable interventions that preserve client dignity. Due to an influx of funding from Proposition HHH, Measure H, and other local funding efforts, the supply of PSH dwellings has increased rapidly since around 2015. Currently, LA County has completed 10,260 supportive housing units, with 2,824 currently under construction.¹ While these are promising figures, Housing Works had to formalize the Slow Skating approach to handle the increased demand under strained timelines.

While Housing Works had relied on existing, intentional partnerships for its PSH work, the increased volume of PSH production and the associated developers, many of whom were unfamiliar to Housing Works, required a clear, repeatable framework. Utilizing this newly formalized Slow Skating process has helped Housing Works take advantage of new opportunities while remaining committed to its values and high service standards. Slow Skating has helped its staff forge strong new collaborative relationships. It has also empowered them to decline partnering with some developments they feel do not align with their commitment to high-quality, individualized, and trauma-informed services, or whose project timelines are too compressed to create an intentional community where such services are possible. Slow Skating is fundamental, as service provider partners are often not engaged by developers until late in this process and are frequently given very short timelines. Slow Skating ensures that service agencies are not pressured into poorly fitting partnerships; instead, they collaborate with partners that align with their organizational vision, mission, and goals. Additionally, the lengthy and complicated housing development journey often concentrates financial control and

¹ LAHD. (2016). Supportive Housing Update – LAHD. Lacity.gov. <https://housing.lacity.gov/hhh-progress>

decision-making within developers and property management firms, at the expense of necessary, strong service partnerships that are essential for success once buildings are completed and ready for leasing. Slow Skating empowers service providers to be brought in as equally crucial partners in the development process, whose knowledge and skills are essential to the success of the PSH community.

Importance of Service Provider Voice in PSH Sites

Misalignment between developers, property management, and service agencies can have profound implications for service provision and client success. For instance, if unpredictable situations arise on the ground at the housing location, clearly established roles facilitate conflict resolution. When agencies are not given input on property specifications, they are hindered in their ability to provide trauma-informed care. A key component of PSH is community empowerment through dwellings, where residents are active participants in shaping the social and physical environments they inhabit. This manifests through decisions about design and immediate surroundings, as well as conversations that service agencies are uniquely positioned to have. When service agencies are excluded from such discussions, recipients of PSH may be less successful in retaining housing and may live in dwellings with inadequate communal spaces, limited privacy, and unmet needs. The design of PSH's physical spaces can have significant ramifications for residents' sense of belonging, autonomy, and interpersonal connections. These can be crucial factors in one's long-term housing retention, and the lack of intentional design, often informed by lived experts or service providers, can similarly harm residents' ability to stay housed.

From a service provision standpoint, the diversity of the PSH community's needs, ranging from substance-use treatment to physical health support, counselling resources, and beyond, underscores the necessity of service agency input and strong collaboration among all groups working at the property. This kind of partnership is only possible when developers, property management, and service providers are aligned with the goal of keeping tenants housed and working towards their personal, service, and housing goals. Often, property management entities are unfamiliar with PSH clientele and can be prone to more punitive actions, like eviction, that risk pushing tenants back into homelessness and creating an adversarial environment where residents do not feel supported by property management, developers, or service provider staff. Based on H3E and HPRI's research with DHS providers, this is a frequent challenge in Los Angeles. Luckily, strong collaborative partnerships can prevent these issues.

Establishing clear guidelines on lease violations and the eviction process is essential in identifying and addressing issues within a PSH community, while helping as many tenants as

possible remain stably housed. When the trio of developers, property management, and service providers have clear roles and established patterns of collaboration, they are better equipped to solve emerging issues and prevent future problems altogether. Property management can focus on maintaining clean and safe communities for all residents, fostering positive relationships with tenants, and identifying behavior that violates lease agreements or community rules. Service providers can focus on case management, helping tenants learn to live in shared, supportive housing environments and preventing potential divides between tenants and property management. A strong understanding of target populations and local challenges provides insight into essential considerations, such as gang-intervention services, which may otherwise be overlooked. Challenges with tenants are inevitable throughout the life of a given development; the best way to address them is through a clear definition of roles and a willingness to collaborate among the developer, property management, and service provider organizations. Slow Skating helps cement this understanding before any tenants even enter the building.

Expanding the Slow Skating Framework

Currently, many PSH communities are not funded at a level that allows property management and service providers to maintain property safety and ensure that all residents receive robust, individualized supportive services. Taking the previous example of gang intervention, many sites are not budgeted for this work, even when in areas affected by gang violence. Without funding to prevent it, gang activity may take hold near and within PSH sites, endangering everyone in the community and requiring a much lengthier and costlier set of interventions. While funding challenges remain omnipresent in the homelessness response sector, the lack of adequate funding increases the likelihood that PSH sites will fall into disrepair or unsafe conditions, and individuals will not remain stably housed. Slow Skating helps bring providers in as equal partners who can advocate for adequate budgets that enable robust services tailored to each community.

Additionally, the challenges of braiding funding sources in PSH, where multiple, distinct funding streams, such as federal grants, state funds, and private philanthropy, are coordinated to support a single program, project, or participant, lead to the practice of mixing affordable housing units into PSH sites. Such affordable housing units often do not include supportive services. This may mean that a service partner is funded only to provide supportive services to some of the community's residents. This presents a significant challenge when problems extend beyond a single individual. When addressing a community-wide problem, it is crucial that service provider organizations collaborate with all community members to create effective and lasting solutions. This emerging challenge has led Housing Works to decide that any supportive

services they provide for a PSH site should be available to all residents, regardless of their placement funding source.

Housing Works has also recently begun negotiating brokering fees as part of its Slow Skating process, ensuring that it is adequately funded to help developers and property management locate, place, and lease up PSH recipients. Braided funding sources, such as tax credits, often have strict timelines that lead to urgent rushes to lease up and move people in. This is a complex process that underscores the importance of early engagement with developers and property management to establish clear roles and lines of collaboration. Once a community's construction is complete, it takes collaboration from all parties to lease up the building while simultaneously creating a strong sense of community and respect for rules that will keep the PSH site safe and successful far into the future.