



U.S. Dept. of Housing and Urban Development Case Study

Portland, Oregon: Innovative Homeless Service Model at Bud Clark Commons

Bud Clark Commons, named after a former mayor of Portland, Oregon who championed the city's 1986 homelessness plan, is a comprehensive services center that seeks to provide stability to the lives of those experiencing homelessness. As an important element of the city's 10-year plan to end homelessness, the LEED Platinum-certified project combines a resource center with transitional and supportive housing in an eight-story structure. The success of the project is a direct result of the partnership between the Portland Housing Bureau, Home Forward, Multnomah County, and Transition Projects, Inc. (TPI).

Background and Context

The Portland City Council adopted [Home Again: A 10-Year Plan to End Homelessness in Portland and Multnomah County](#) (10-Year Plan) in 2005 to address the challenges of chronic homelessness. A count of Multnomah County's homeless in 2003 had revealed that approximately 17,000 persons suffered from housing instability at some point during the year, and point-in-time counts conducted biennially from 2007 to 2011 showed increases in the number of unsheltered individuals from 1,438 in 2007 to 1,718 four years later. The city's homeless service providers, however, did not have the capacity to adequately support Portland's homeless population. The 10-Year Plan was developed to guide the city's efforts: focus on the most chronically homeless populations, streamline access to existing services to prevent and reduce other homelessness, and concentrate resources on programs that offer measureable results. These strategies provided the inspiration for the Commons, where supportive services are co-located with transitional housing and permanent housing.¹

In 2007, the Portland Housing Bureau, the Portland Development Commission, Home Forward (formerly the Housing Authority of Portland), and TPI (a leading homeless service provider in the city) began planning the project that would become the Commons. Following negotiations with local neighborhood organizations, the development team identified a suitable site for the project in a prominent location along NW Broadway, north of the city's downtown. Straddling the boundaries of the Pearl District and the city's historic Old Town Chinatown neighborhood, the site is highly visible to those entering downtown from the Broadway Bridge and it is also near other providers who serve the homeless population. Its visibility stands as a testament to the city's commitment to addressing the needs of its most vulnerable individuals.²

Innovative Program and Design

As the recipient of the [American Institute of Architects \(AIA\)/HUD Secretary's Creating Community Connection](#) Award, the Commons is recognized as a dignified space where the city's most vulnerable residents have access to a continuum of treatment and services. The Commons' three primary programs are distinguished vertically in the eight-story structure.

A transitional shelter for men, Doreen's Place, occupies the building's first floor. The 90-bed facility, with 45 beds reserved for veterans, includes storage areas for residents, a kitchen and common space — where service providers prepare and serve one meal a day — exercise facilities, and a courtyard. Case managers and counselors help residents move toward self-sufficiency and housing stability.³

The Day Center, occupying the second and third floors, serves as the central access point for the homeless and provides an array of resources and services. Those living on the street are able to find such necessities as clothing, meals, showers, and laundry facilities at the Day Center, where case managers are also available to assist in locating permanent housing. A wellness center provides basic healthcare and connections to the larger medical community, and a learning center offers computer and skills training, as well as the opportunity to prepare for the General Educational Development (GED®) test. As the operator of the shelter and the Day Center, TPI partners with more than 20 agencies, organizations, and institutions to coordinate the range of available services and provide Portland's homeless with a foothold on stability.⁴

The Commons' upper floors consist of 130 units of permanent supportive housing reserved for the region's most vulnerable homeless persons. The 350-square-foot studio apartments include a bathroom and a kitchenette. A common room on the fourth floor offers residents a television and internet access, and balconies on each floor provide outdoor gathering spaces.⁵ The operator of the facility's housing component, Home Forward, prioritizes the placement of individuals using a [vulnerability assessment tool](#) developed by the Downtown Emergency Service Center in Seattle, Washington.⁶ The assessment uses 10 indicators, or "[domains of vulnerability](#)," to measure an individual's vulnerability to continued homelessness. The indicators include assessments of an individual's ability to meet their basic needs, risk of mortality, social behaviors, and the nature and extent of homelessness. Similar uses of a vulnerability index to prioritize healthcare and housing needs for homeless persons are presented in the summer 2012 issue of *Evidence Matters*. The index was created in Boston in the 1990s and used extensively in New York in the 2000s, and is being used by Common Ground in its national 100,000 Homes Program.⁷

Home Forward partners with four community health clinics, which administer the assessment to their clients and screen prospective residents for placement by Home Forward.⁸ This "[Housing First](#)" approach leverages permanent supportive housing to help effectively manage many of the root causes of chronic homelessness, including mental illness, chemical addictions, and unemployment, although housing assistance is not conditioned on participation in supportive social programs.

The building's design reflects the desire to create an inviting, utilitarian, and durable space that benefits both residents and others accessing services, while also contributing to the social and physical fabric of the surrounding neighborhood.⁹ To meet these goals, access to the center's various programs was carefully considered. Each of the Commons' three programs has a separate entrance to facilitate operations and promote the safety and well-being of staff, residents, and those seeking services. The entrances to Doreen's Place and the apartments are located on the building's southwestern and southeastern corners, respectively. The Day Center is accessed through a courtyard on the site's northeastern corner; the courtyard serves as a transition area between the property's public and private spaces and limits queuing along the sidewalk by those seeking services.¹⁰ The architects used the grade of the site — which gains elevation from the south to the north — to ensure that the Day Center and Doreen's Place are both accessible from the street, despite being on different floors.¹¹

The building's western façade consists of floor-to-ceiling windows at street level that admit an abundance of daylight and connect the facility with the surrounding neighborhood. Throughout the Commons, polished concrete floors contrast with brightly colored furnishings, and wood paneling and finishes are used to create a welcoming space that is durable but not institutional.¹² The building's architects maintained sight lines in the Day Center to allow staff to better manage the center's operations.¹³

The Commons' design also includes features that promote resource efficiency and environmental sustainability. Estimated to be 45 percent more efficient than a similar baseline building, the Commons is one of the first LEED Platinum-certified buildings of its kind in the country. The building incorporates technologies that minimize energy consumption, including a heat recovery system to condition air that is circulated into the building and a high-performance building envelope. Rooftop solar panels generate 80 percent of the energy needed for hot water heating, and ENERGY STAR® appliances are used throughout the facility. A greywater recycling system captures water from showers and washing machines to flush toilets, and the courtyards feature native, drought-tolerant plants watered with rain that falls on the site.¹⁴

Financing and Planning

Development of the Commons coincided with the onset of the recession and would not have been possible without strong support from the city of Portland's leadership and the allocation of federal and local resources. The city contributed \$29.5 million in tax increment financing, made possible by the project's location in the River District Urban Renewal Area, and an additional \$11.7 million was generated through the sale of low-income housing tax credits. Along with these funds, the project also received \$3.3 million in gap financing from HUD. Made available by the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009, these funds were used to stimulate projects stalled by the weakening market for tax credits.¹⁵

The challenging economic times contributed to the project's innovative design. The original plans called for two mid-rise buildings spanning the city block. However, as the project's financing decreased, the architects proposed a less expensive alternative design: stacking the three major program components vertically in a single structure. Although this solution slightly reduced the total number of apartments, it strengthened the vision of a continuum of homeless services by uniting the various components in one building.¹⁶

Experience Gained

Bud Clark Commons is showing measureable results in leveraging its three program elements to promote housing stability among Portland's homeless. In the year following the Commons' June 2011 opening, TPI has served more than 7,000 homeless persons at the Day Center and Doreen's Place, including approximately 200 veterans at the shelter. More than 3,600 individuals have been connected with social services, and more than 350 permanent housing placements have been made.¹⁷ For the city's most vulnerable homeless, the 130 permanent supportive housing units have been effective in creating stability, with resident retention at more than 80 percent.¹⁸

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1. Citizens Commission on Homelessness. 2004. "Home Again: A 10-Year Plan to End Homelessness in Portland and Multnomah County"; Kristina Smock Consulting, prepared for Portland Housing Bureau, 211info, and Multnomah County. June 2011. "[2011 Point-in-Time Count of Homelessness in Portland and Multnomah County.](#)"
 2. Portland Development Commission, Resolution No. 6564 (www.pdc.us/Libraries/Board_Resolutions/Resolution-No-6644-RAC-IGA_pdf.sflb.ashx). Accessed 19 November 2012.
 3. Bud Clark Commons Final Monthly Report, June 2011; [Home Forward, Bud Clark Commons](#); building plans provided by Hoist Architecture.
 4. Bud Clark Commons Final Monthly Report, June 2011; [Home Forward, Bud Clark Commons](#); Doreen Binder, executive director, Transition Projects, Inc., telephone interview, 2 October 2012.
 5. Dave Otte. 2012. "Housing First at Bud Clark Commons," *Residential Architecture: AIA Northwest and Pacific Region* 10:4, 62–65.
 6. Mike Andrews and Rachel Duke, Home Forward, telephone interview, 9 October 2012.
 7. "[Linking Housing and Health Care Works for Chronically Homeless Persons](#)," *Evidence Matters*, Summer 2012.
 8. Ibid.
 9. Dave Otte 2012.

10. Dave Otte, Hoist Architecture, telephone interview, 4 October 2012; documents provided by Hoist Architecture.
11. Dave Otte interview.
12. Dave Otte 2012.
13. Dave Otte interview.
14. Documents provided by Hoist Architecture.
15. Portland Housing Board. 2011. "Bud Clark Commons: One Building, Three Elements of Service."
16. Dave Otte interview.
17. Data provided by Doreen Binder, executive director, Transition Projects, Inc.
18. Mike Andrews and Rachel Duke interview.