



Lamp Community: Multiple Means of Entry and a Non-Linear Approach to Supportive Housing

Lamp Lodge is a permanent supportive housing project run by Lamp Community. The comprehensive range of services offered by Lamp Community, called its “community model,” viewed in its entirety or in key components, is a promising practice for supportive housing providers. A description of these services, including Lamp Community’s approach to substance use, follows, as well as a bit of the story of how Lamp Community came to encompass so many different areas of homeless services.

Separately available are a profile on [Lamp Lodge](#) specifically and an accompanying [photo tour](#).

Organizational History

Lamp Community was founded in 1985 as Los Angeles Men’s Place, a storefront drop-in center where homeless men could get off the street and receive voluntary and accessible help with basic needs (e.g., food, clothing, showers, toilets), as well as health screenings, representative payee services, and advocacy services. From the beginning, Lamp Community focused on people with serious mental illnesses. Over time, Lamp began to address the issues of substance use and dual diagnosis (i.e., mental health and substance use issues) as well. Lamp also rethought an initial commitment to abstinence and sobriety and now makes a range of harm reduction services available in all of its program components (see **Approach to Substance Use** below). Other changes have involved serving women as well as men; the addition of crisis housing and substance use recovery programs; new initiatives to offer employment and training through Lamp-owned business enterprises; prisoner reentry programs; and permanent supportive housing.

Lamp Community Today

Today, Lamp Community provides the following services:

- *Crisis Housing.* Lamp Community provides 30 emergency shelter beds, showers and laundry facilities at the Frank Rice SafeHaven.
- *Supportive Housing.* Lamp Lodge, The Ballington, and Pershing Hotel provide over 100 affordable housing units enriched with on-site supportive services. Lamp Village Residence also offers 48 semi-private units with a full-time support staff.
- *Meals.* Over 150,000 meals are served annually, three times a day, every day of the year.
- *Job Training & Employment.* Three Lamp Community social purpose businesses offer valuable employment, job training, and life-skills while providing valuable services to the community broader homeless community in Los Angeles. Also, over 40% of Lamp staff is made up of current or former members.
- *Outreach.* Street Teams work with the street population to encourage recovery and safer behaviors. Outreach to people exiting local institutions helps to break the cycle of homelessness and hospitalization upon release.
- *Mental Health Care.* A staff of thirty trained counselors, case managers, and psychologists give assistance to homeless persons throughout Los Angeles.

- *Substance Use Recovery.* Lamp Community offers a diverse range of recovery services that promote safer behaviors and individual empowerment. Tenants who choose to work toward abstinence are supported in their efforts.
- *Arts Programs.* Museum trips, art history discussions, painting, drawing, photography, and theatrical performances offer homeless and formerly homeless people a healthy, outward expression of their personal experience.

Organizational Philosophy

Lamp Community aims to create a lifelong community where homeless persons with severe mental illness can find a sense of belonging and improve their well-being. Lamp Community further articulates this vision as including:

- *A non-linear housing approach.* Participation in any one of Lamp Community’s programs or services serves as an entry point to the whole array of Lamp Community services and housing detailed above. Clients are assisted whenever they are ready to engage with service providers, regardless of their current situation. Residents and clients are referred to as “community members” who can participate in the full life of the Lamp Community. Community members can move relatively easily from one primary access point to another as their needs change. This fluidness is facilitated by the close physical proximity of all of the Lamp Community services to one another. Each year, approximately five tenants of Lamp Lodge move to other parts of the Lamp Community for more support. These moves can last anywhere from a few days to six months.
- *Building a community of welcome.* Just like any true community, changes in a person’s circumstance are met with care, rather than exclusion. Being a part of the Lamp Community means that staff (and often other community members) will stick by tenants throughout their lives as circumstances change and people grow. A sense of belonging is fostered at all times.

When tenants experience significant changes in their life, they often re-evaluate their self-initiated goals and choose to utilize different combinations of service and housing. Therefore, there are often transitions and movement between the components within the community. Situations such as being abused by a partner or overdosing on drugs may move tenants to re-evaluate their lives, including their housing situation or their substance use. Deciding to transition from one component of Lamp Community to another is based on an agreement between a tenant and staff. If a tenant decides not to stay in the independent permanent housing, staff will continue to work with him or her on pursuing other goals and considering other housing options.

Approach to Services

In addition to the organizational philosophies detailed above, Lamp Community’s service model includes the following components:

- *Offering life-long assistance.* In many cases, mental illness is a long-term condition. Lamp Community provides the life-long supportive services many clients need to attain self-sufficiency and an improved quality of life.

- *Addressing the whole person.* Traditionally, mental health, homeless, HIV/AIDS, and substance use organizations have responded to these distinct issues separately. Lamp Community believes a holistic and integrated approach works best.
- *Offering flexible employment.* Like anybody, men and women with mental illness need dignified employment and job training. Lamp offers a diversity of in-house opportunities in three agency-operated businesses (see further detail below).
- *Providing voluntary health care.* In most cases, forced treatment is ineffective in the long-run. All Lamp Community programs and services are completely voluntary. Lamp Community educates members on all aspects of treatment and allows them to make their own informed decisions (see further detail below).
- *Educating to eliminate stigma.* Lamp Community points out that there should be no shame associated with mental illness. Lamp encourages dialogue and advocates for change within the organization and the community at large.

Support Services and Property Management Collaboration

John Best, Lamp Community's Director of Housing, supervises both the support services and the property management staff at all of the Lamp Community properties. Lamp Community asserts that this helps ensure close collaboration between normally separate departments and continuity of message to tenants. Lamp Community feels that property management is just as important to the success of permanent supportive housing as good supportive services, but has found that many traditional property management firms do not have appropriate training for working with the long-term homeless. Bringing this role in-house allows the appropriate education to take place.

To ensure that the lines between property management and services staff do not become blurred, all staff are educated in what their roles are and are not. John Best points out that when roles are not clearly defined, property managers sometimes take more of a services stance than is appropriate because they wanted to "help" the tenant. Additionally, case managers may want to put themselves in a programmatic, boundary-enforcing role, which is the role of property management. When case managers do this, they often negate their ability to provide relatively neutral support and help because they are no longer an individual trying to help the tenant, but are "the police." This working outside of roles confuses the tenants and the other providers in the building. Any tenant interaction which falls outside of a staff person's area of expertise are referred to another appropriate staff person.

Approach to Substance Use

During its first two years of operation, Lamp Community pushed sobriety and banned from its programs individuals with obvious active substance use issues. It became clear, however, that many of the clients were dually diagnosed with mental health and substance use issues and that no other service provider was meeting their needs. Lamp Community first attempted to confront drug use by utilizing existing drug recovery and treatment programs through referral. However, these programs were not able to fully address the needs of dual-diagnosed clients because at that time, many abstinence-oriented interventions did not allow the use of any psychotropic medications. In

response, Lamp Community began to develop its own drug recovery program and has now evolved to offer a broad spectrum of recovery interventions—from abstinence to managed use.

While Lamp Community recognizes the potential harms and dangers associated with drug use, it also understands that people’s relationship with drugs can be harmful, neutral, or beneficial. Lamp Community points out that prescription drugs are not always beneficial while illegal drugs are not always harmful. This distinction is particularly important in understanding the relationship with drugs among dually-diagnosed individuals.

Many individuals with a mental health issues use alcohol and drugs to self-medicate, alleviate their symptoms, and manage their pain. When people’s symptoms of mental illness are “managed” by their drug use, users can view the relationship with the drugs as “beneficial.” However, when the level of drug use exacerbates or worsens their mental health conditions, the relationship with drugs can be viewed as turning “harmful.” Similarly, psychiatric medications can also be viewed by individuals with mental illness as “harmful” because of side effects, stigmatization, and other issues.

With this understanding, Lamp Community emphasizes assisting program participants in being fully informed about drug use. This helps them gain insights into their own reasons for drug use, facilitates honest discussion and better decisions, and minimizes the legal, health, and economic risks associated with drug use. Program participants articulate their own approach to substance use, ranging from abstinence to varying levels of use. Lamp Community staff supports tenants in making their own choices and works with tenants toward meeting their own goals, reevaluating when necessary.

For those moving to a harm reduction model, Lamp stresses the importance of understanding harm reduction fully. It is especially important to acknowledge that a harm reduction approach does not negate the need for more structured programs with some tenants. Training in harm reduction should start at with the basics and be team-based, ongoing, situation-specific, and on-site if possible. Finally, it is important to recognize that different people need different approaches and that harm reduction will not receive a 100% positive response from all tenants. For those who harm reduction does not work, eviction may be necessary. Every potential eviction must be treated on a case-by-case basis and tenants must understand that when an eviction is necessary, it is not a personal attack, but an acknowledgement that this program is not working for them at this time. Lamp is very clear that harm reduction does not mean shielding tenants from the consequences of their choices. At the same time, any eviction must be accompanied with a willingness to accept people back when they are ready to return, even if it is only a few months later.

Tenant Employment

Tenants are encouraged to seek employment opportunities at Lamp Community’s Linen Service (provides linen and laundry services to nonprofit hotels, shelters, and other businesses), Laundromat, and Public Showers, in addition to positions of Peer Advocate, Receptionist, and Night-watch Security in housing facilities. The employment portion of Lamp’s program is currently being refocused after the Linen Service was not able to operate profitably. Between three and fifteen Lamp Lodge tenants are doing some type of work at Lamp Community’s businesses or programs at any given time. To date there few resources focused on finding employment for

tenants in non-Lamp businesses. Lamp looks forward to continuing to learn in the area of tenant employment and exploring the possibilities.

Success Stories

Lamp Community's non-linear approach to housing has been quite successful for many tenants and clients. Here are two stories which illustrate Lamp's flexibility and willingness to work with tenants and clients, not matter where they at in life. Some of the details have been changed to protect the privacy of the individuals.

Mark experiences both mental illness and substance use issues and has some college experience. The year prior to entering Lamp permanent housing, Mark was homeless, shifting between shelters and SRO hotels. Lamp outreach staff invited him to move into permanent housing. Mark successfully lived in Lamp housing for 1.5 years before not paying rent for two consecutive months. Supportive services staff facilitated Mark's pledge to pay rent for one of those months. Given the his situation and feeling like he was always running from loan sharks and drug dealers, Mark moved to one of Lamp's shelter facilities before moving to Florida to live with relatives. Approximately one year later, he moved back to Los Angeles, is living near Lamp Community, and is receiving support services from the Lamp Community Day Center.

Nadra experiences mental illness and has a history of psychiatric hospitalization. The year prior to entering Lamp permanent housing, she was homeless and living on the streets and SRO hotels and was arrested for possession of an illegal weapon. After living in Lamp housing for three months, Nadra moved to a one-bedroom apartment out of the neighborhood, but continued to receive support services through Lamp Community and employment with Lamp. Her employment at Lamp led to lucrative employment with a for-profit employer outside of the neighborhood.

Lessons Learned

- The Lamp Community Housing Director integrates property management and case management into a supportive housing team. This team approach, when combined with clear delineation of the roles of line staff, offers consistency and security to tenants who have often experienced social rejection and instability in their lives. This is atypical among supportive housing providers, many of whom find more success operating property management and services separately.
- Ongoing situational training of staff members on the application of philosophical and theoretical principals is very important. Lamp Community is committed to the linkage of theory and practice. This happens most clearly with a team approach to training. An expert service team may spend the day with newer staff, teaching as examples present themselves throughout the day.
- On-site psychiatric and counseling options are a valuable resource for both tenants and staff. Tenants who may not be willing to travel off-site for these services can access them easily, while staff can have mental health experts on site and easily accessible for questions.
- A comprehensive harm reduction approach (including the possibility of abstinence) seems to be the only effective means of providing housing for many who have been homeless for the

long-term. At the same time, it is important to recognize that different people need different approaches and that harm reduction will not receive a 100% positive response from all tenants.