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## HOUSING

# Program links landlords, homeless

OC groups help people find permanent shelter through government vouchers

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The math seems a no-brainer.

On one side, landlords, property managers and others who belong to the Apartment Association of Orange County control more than 85,000 rental units around the county.

On the other, about 100 individuals and families who have struggled with homelessness—but recently have been issued federally-subsidized vouchers to pay their rent—have been referred to United Way Orange County's Welcome Home OC program. The vouchers can get people off the streets, out of shelters and into a place to call home. And the Wel-

come Home OC program is supposed to help them in that search.

Surely, somewhere among those 85,000 units, shouldn't there be room for the 100?

Maybe not. The problem is finding a landlord willing to rent to them.

All too often, would-be tenants spend months searching to no avail. Worse, the federal vouchers are good for only four months. If a person can't find a place to live in that time, that golden ticket

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James Wohrman, president of FDC Management, is working with Orange County United Way's campaign to help end homelessness through a landlord incentive program.

PHOTO BY  
BILL ALKOBER

## Program

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can expire. Extensions can be granted, but it's up to the issuing housing authority.

Advocates for the homeless blame fear. They say it's hard for landlords to look beyond stereotypes about homeless people. And, many note, there are legitimate concerns over the red tape that comes with HUD's guidelines. Plus, the county's housing market is tight, so it's not hard to find a tenant who'll pay full freight without needing a federal booster check.

It's an equation that Welcome Home OC—a public-private initiative that includes landlords, county housing officials and homeless service providers—hopes to solve.

### Call for more vouchers

Money is part of the answer.

Welcome Home OC, which began with \$250,000 from the county and \$600,000 from United Way, does offer financial incentives—along with other assurances—to get landlords to house people deemed “chronically homeless” by

the county.

Since March, when Welcome Home OC launched the landlord outreach, the group has housed 47 people in 32 units. Those rents are subsidized by vouchers issued through the Orange County Housing Authority and the Santa Ana Housing Authority. Another 28 voucher-holding clients are still looking.

More than 20 landlords have bought in. The challenge is finding more.

The Apartment Association of Orange County is now a partner in Welcome Home OC. David Cordero, the organization's executive director, pledged to talk with landlords about the importance of “bridging the housing gap for our most vulnerable population.”

This week, at an AAOC meeting, Cordero and representatives of United Way made that pitch to about 175 landlords and invited them to sign up for workshops to learn more.

As they met, homelessness in Southern California was flaring up as a national story.

President Donald Trump, in California to raise money for reelection, suggested the state's housing regulations

and Democratic fecklessness are responsible for the region's booming homeless population. State officials responded that the Trump administration has exacerbated a long-growing problem through its tax policies and a push to reduce social services that can keep people off the streets.

Both sides swapped angry letters—including a letter on Monday from Gov. Gavin Newsom addressed to President Trump and a Wednesday response to Newsom signed by HUD Secretary Ben Carson.

As leader of the Apartment Owners Association, Cordero believes that if HUD raised its voucher payment standard for Orange County, which ranges from \$1,410 for a bachelor unit to \$3,052 a month for a five-bedroom unit, the number of units covered would increase and it would boost “the number of rental communities that might participate in the program.”

### Making it work

The designation “chronically homeless” isn't pretty. But, for Welcome Home OC clients, it can be helpful. It means going to the front of the line for a hous-

ing voucher. It also means getting so-called “wrap-around” services, which can include help in budgeting and assistance if any landlord-tenant issues come up.

Welcome Home OC also helps out voucher-holders with money to pay security deposits, move-in costs and some furnishings. For landlords, the program will cover the cost of the lag time in keeping a unit off the market while inspections required under HUD's voucher system can be conducted, a process that can take weeks or even months.

There's also a “signing bonus” of \$500 for the first unit rented to a program client. The longer-term payoff, according to Welcome Home supporters, is a tenant who won't fall behind in rent and is likely to remain in place.

When James Wohrman, president of FDC Management Inc., first heard about Welcome Home OC as a member of the Apartment Association board a few months ago, it seemed like a missing piece had fallen into place.

“I thought it was the first time anybody credible had put together an entire package of resources to actually address the problem,” he

said.

Two properties that he oversees—both well-kept, smaller complexes in Garden Grove—are working with the Welcome Home program. So far, he said, six tenants with vouchers had moved in or were in the process of doing so.

“If this goes well,” Wohrman said, “we're likely to expand.”

### One man's blessing

For Sean, a formerly homeless man in his 60s who declined to give his last name and exact age because he worried his situation could hinder his chances at landing a job, the Welcome Home program is working out.

On Sept. 5 he signed a lease for a one-bedroom apartment in Garden Grove, subsidized by a housing voucher. It ended a period of living in his car and occasionally scraping up money for a motel room. His only income right now is general relief.

He said he had lost his job in another state during the Great Recession and simultaneously went through a “devastating” divorce. He moved to Orange County in 2009 on the promise of a job and a place to live.

The job was basically not for pay, but in exchange for a place to stay off and on at the back of a couple's business, he said. By late last year he was sleeping regularly in his car, mostly in Huntington Beach.

But with the help of Lisa Roberts, who works for Huntington Beach as a homeless outreach case manager, he also applied for help in finding housing. In July, a voucher came through.

“I went from despair to elation,” Sean said. “But then I'd go out and start looking, only to realize how few landlords will take those vouchers.”

Then, through Roberts, Sean learned of the Welcome Home OC program. He got one of the apartments leased out by Wohrman's company. United Way gave him money for a refrigerator and other household goods. Roberts will continue as Sean's case manager to keep him moving forward; he has a medical issue that needs to be addressed.

“I plan to be a dream tenant,” Sean said.

When his lease ends, he said, “I want them to beg me to stay.”