

THE TRIBUNE

Old Sunny Acres building to become housing for people with mental disabilities

Nonprofit, SLO County agree to 5-year timeline to come up with renovation plan

By AnnMarie Cornejo

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Transitions Mental Health Association plans to build up to 35 studio apartments for its clients at Sunny Acres, the building perched on the hilltop above Johnson Avenue in San Luis Obispo.
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Peggy Genoway, 58, had lived in her car for eight months before [Transitions Mental Health Association](#) helped her secure permanent housing last November. But far more people need help than the nonprofit can provide.

A plan to change that is underway.

More permanent housing for people with mental disabilities may be available in the next five to eight years. Transitions plans to build up to 35 studio apartments for its clients at Sunny Acres — the ramshackle two-story brick building perched on the hilltop above Johnson Avenue in San Luis Obispo.

The nonprofit organization secured an agreement this week from the San Luis Obispo County [Board of Supervisors](#) that will allow it to buy the long vacant property from San Luis Obispo County for \$1,100.

Transitions, the leading agency in the county for promoting recovery and wellness for people with mental illness, will restore the exterior of the Sunny Acres building and completely remodel the interior into 13 studio units and a community room. The agency was also given the option of building up to three more buildings with 22 studios.

“We have seen that if you don’t have safe, affordable and well-located housing, it is really hard to move forward in terms of a healthy recovery for folks with mental illness,” said Jill Bolster-White, Transitions’ executive director.

The estimated cost of the project is \$5 million — which includes such necessary steps as preserving Sunny Acres’ façade and ridding the aged building of asbestos. That estimate excludes utilities and roads.

Bolster-White said the nonprofit would rely on a combination of funding sources including state and federal grants and historic preservation tax credits.

Transitions and the county have agreed to a five-year timeline to have a secure plan in place to build the project. The next step for the nonprofit is to put together a financing package, which includes applying for state and federal grants.

Sunny Acres, once an orphanage and later a county-run juvenile detention center, has been vacant for more than 40 years.

Known for its Romanesque architecture, the building is owned by the county of San Luis Obispo but is within city limits.

The county considered selling the property to private owners but John Ashbaugh, a San Luis Obispo city councilman and former Transitions board member, had a different vision for it.

Transitions has been working since 2011 to put the plan in place.

“Most people we have in our programs are people who have a substantial impairment with mental illness,” Bolster-White said. “Our goal is recovery and housing is a huge element of that.”

In the county there are about 80 beds for clients, some of that transitional housing, she said.

“This is one of the top needs in the county,” Bolster-White said. “If we are trying to get people off the streets, but we don’t have housing that is affordable and reasonable it becomes nearly impossible.”

Genoway, who struggles with post traumatic stress disorder and other mental health challenges, is a prime example. She became homeless when the illegal unit she was living in was condemned by the city of San Luis Obispo.

She spent months sleeping in her car and occasionally on the floor of someone’s office for a night, taking online classes while sitting at Starbucks to finish her bachelor’s degree.

Genoway now lives in the Nipomo Street Studios in San Luis Obispo — one of three wellness centers that provide housing, case management and recovery-based support programs for those people living with mental illness.

“I just started my master’s degree in psychology — something that could have never been done from my car,” said Genoway, who wants to one day be a marriage and family therapist.

Living on the streets, especially as a woman, was scary and overwhelming, she said.

“This community has raised me in a sense,” Genoway said. “It was here that my alcoholism was brought to my attention, here that I got sober, here that I found a support group. Finding Transitions was the icing on the cake. It has made me whole.”

She is one of eight residents living at the San Luis Obispo residential program — all of them homeless before being placed in the studio apartments.

She participates in group therapy, women’s meetings and other programs offered by the nonprofit.

“I am finally in a place that I feel like I can have a life,” Genoway said. “It feels so good.”

The goal is to replicate the program at Sunny Acres, making it a wellness campus.

“I want more people to be able to do this,” Genoway said. “I don’t think it is possible for me to explain how this made my life more complete.”

Read more here: <http://www.sanluisobispo.com/2014/04/04/3006406/transitions-mental-health-sunny.html#storylink=cpy>