

'Housing First' fails residents and the community

Sarah Smith

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It has been widely reported that Las Cruces is struggling with crime and drugs in and near the Desert Hope Affordable Housing Project on Pecos Street, near Solano and Idaho. Desert Hope is a “Housing First” project aimed specifically at providing homes for the homeless, yet residents and nearby neighbors have repeatedly complained about the rise in crime and drugs since the apartments opened in August 2021. As the Las Cruces City Council and Mesilla Valley Public Housing Authority continue to struggle to make Desert Hope a success, it is important to look closely at the results of Housing First elsewhere in places where it has been used extensively for decades.

Vanessa* grew up in foster care and then transitioned into Housing First apartments 20 years ago. She expected that her transition out of foster care would take her to where she would be helped in learning the skills she needed to become independent and ready to strike out on her own. Yet the reality was much different.

Instead of being in an environment where she could learn and thrive, Vanessa found herself in a chaotic environment filled with drugs, violence, and prostitution. Alongside the elderly and people trying desperately to improve their situations, there were many people who were struggling with addiction and mental health problems. This is because Housing First offers unconditional housing to people, meaning that there are no requirements for people to abstain from alcohol or drugs in order to receive housing.

In Vanessa’s experience living in various Housing First projects for the last 20 years, fighting and violence are common occurrences. Drug and alcohol usage are rampant, such that those who are trying to escape from drug addiction and alcoholism are unlikely to succeed when the temptation is so often right in front of them. Some of the apartments have housed violent men, including men who are members of known hate groups as well as sex offenders.

Vanessa has had her windows broken, her screen door has been torn off the hinges, and she has suffered sleep deprivation due to excessive noise. The apartments and facilities are often not kept up, such that at times Vanessa has had to wash her clothes in her bathtub since the washing machines are broken. The living environment is so turbulent that Vanessa has turned to alcohol herself at times, as a way to cope with living there.

Vanessa is hesitant to speak publicly about her experiences living in the “Housing First” apartments. In the past, when she has made complaints about the living conditions to try to improve the situation, she has been retaliated against by the people who run the apartments. She has faced bullying and racial slurs from the staff of some apartment complexes.

Here in Las Cruces, the Desert Hope apartments have echoed the same problems that Vanessa has faced elsewhere. The nearby neighborhood as well as residents of Desert Hope have spoken up repeatedly about the problems there including drugs, violence, trespassing, property damage, and prostitution. Although this Housing First project has provided shelter to homeless people, there are many other ways in which this model is failing our community and the people who live there.

Like Vanessa, it is clear to people living here at Desert Hope that the Housing First model fails because of the drugs and violence that come along with it. Here, too, people living in Desert Hope are afraid to speak out for fear of retaliation. And so, the violence, drugs, and unsafe living conditions have persisted at Desert Hope, just as at other Housing First projects.

**Vanessa’s name has been changed to protect her anonymity.*

Las Cruces resident Sarah Smith is a leader of the New Mexico Freedoms Alliance, a non-partisan coalition advocating for healthy, safe communities statewide.

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