

Addressing Homelessness as a means of Preserving the Urban Fabric

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Addressing Homelessness as a means of Preserving the Urban Fabric

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Abstract

In 1772, Clarksburg, West Virginia, was a well-known Appalachian city. Before the Great Depression, Clarksburg had a booming economy from coal and glass production. By the 21st Century, Clarksburg was a forgotten memory and its building stock had become abandoned. **Many of Clarksburg's iconic buildings are in disrepair and have been overtaken by the homeless.** According to the U.S Department of **Housing and Urban Development's (HUD) 2019 Annual Homeless Assessment reports**, 567,715 people experienced homelessness in a single night.¹ The United States Interagency Council **on homelessness states, "As of January 2019, West Virginia had an estimated 1,397 experiencing homelessness on any given day, as reported by Continuums of Care the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). Of those totals, 79 were family households, 137 were Veterans, 89 were unaccompanied young adults (age 18 - 24), and 161 were individuals experiencing chronic homelessness."**²

To address homelessness in Clarksburg, one viable option is to preserve existing buildings and redesign them into more affordable housing for those in need. To influence the design of supportive housing for women and children experiencing homelessness in Clarksburg, it is important to learn about three case studies for homeless housing. To help understand how

socioeconomic factors impact urban development, consider design strategies such as adaptive reuse and sustainable principles, and determine whether existing infrastructure is better than building new will.

This information could support the framework for preservation and adaptation of current building stock to accommodate housing and a skill-training facility to rehabilitate homeless individuals and underprivileged persons within Clarksburg.

Since homelessness needs to be addressed broadly and rapidly, perhaps, a proposal could be considered for other cities facing similar issues affecting their building fabric and community within a more rural context. A national plan to renovate existing abandoned infrastructures could help communities reduce homelessness and prevent the housing crisis from worsening.

Keywords: Homelessness, Historic Preservation, Adaptive Reuse, Affordable Housing, and Housing First

Introduction

Social and economic problems, such as unemployment and increased costs of living, have placed burdens on many West Virginia residents. Homelessness exists in many cities within the state, and officials are faced with how to help these individuals. No individual intends to be homeless; however, personal issues, economic downfalls, increased rent, or

¹ (HUD No. 20-003)

² (US Interagency Council on Homelessness, 2018)

unemployment may befall an individual leading to homelessness. Many ignore or judge the homeless, thinking they are all dangerous drug addicts who committed a series of crimes that led them to live on the streets. There may be valid instances like this, but research shows that some homeless persons once led productive lives. Sadly, their situation spiraled down and the individual could no longer afford to live in a socially developed environment.

Between 1920 and 1980, Clarksburg was a city populated by high society with extreme wealth. Since the post-industrial revolution, the city brought people into the area because of the coal, glass, oil, and gas industries. Today, the coal and glass factories are shut down and the oil and gas industries are a boom or bust situation causing job loss. Today, a lack of work opportunities drives people out of Clarksburg leaving many of the city's iconic buildings in disrepair and increasing homelessness.

Clarksburg offers early 19th century vacant buildings that could be restored to house and rehabilitate homeless individuals, and thereby improve the community, lower crime rates, and emergency medical and police responses. Through adaptive re-use of one or more of the abandoned buildings in Clarksburg, city officials could house single men and women from the ages of 25 – 65 and offer skill-based training to help support the Clarksburg economy.

Methodology

The social, political and economic concerns of the Clarksburg, and lessons learned from the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrate why supportive housing is better than homeless shelters. Evaluating three case studies (The Jimmy Heath House in Cincinnati, The Prince George Hotel in New York City, and The Skid Row Simon Hotel in California) could offer viable strategies to re-adapt abandoned buildings for **Clarksburg's homeless. The case studies** incorporate different supportive program methodologies such as the Housing First model, Harm Reduction model, and Breaking Ground. These all give insight to creating or using the **best supportive programs for Clarksburg's** homeless who may also struggle with mental illness, substance abuse or addiction. Clarksburg has the second-highest population in the state, and homelessness significantly increased over the past ten years. The Clarksburg Mission, a religious-based organization, once housed 10-20 people each night and today has over 100 each day. By

finding solutions in parallel to the Mission's services, Clarksburg can better manage housing and feeding those in need. Finding a better suited space for the homeless and low-income families could lessen Clarksburg's socio-economic issues. This study suggests a plan to renovate existing abandoned infrastructures in West Virginia could be adopted in other post-industrial rural cities to reduce homelessness.

The magnitude of homelessness deeply affects the socio-economic standards across the United States. Missions and homeless shelters feed people in need two or three times a day and only offer a safe place to sleep overnight and are not long-term solutions. Functioning at this level can create more of a financial burden. By morning, shelters close and the homeless are back on the streets, and continuing to suffer from addictions, mental illness, and crime. These situations lead to a greater burden on emergency rooms and the criminal justice system.

Case Study #1: Jimmy Heath House Cincinnati, Ohio



Figure 1: The Jimmy Heath House
(“Jimmy Heath House,” CUDA Studio)

The Jimmy Heath House is part of the Over-the-Rhine community housing program, which is approximately 362.5 acres, making it one of the largest urban historic districts in the United

States.³ The Jimmy Heath House was overseen by architecture firm CUDA, and led by Jeff Raser, who helped finance the Over-the-Rhine Community Housing project through the Low Income Housing Tax Credits.⁴ The CUDA studio designed the Jimmy Heath House by connecting five adjacent historical buildings to create 25 apartment units, a common area on each floor, office and conference area, and a common kitchen and living area. The 25 units consist of 11 efficiencies and 14 one-bedrooms.

The Jimmy Heath House is a permanent supportive housing project for chronically homeless men, based on the "Housing First" policy. Housing First is a permanent housing assistance approach to help end chronic homelessness and improve their quality of life. Figure 2, shows how Housing First Approach skips over shelter placement and transitional housing and goes straight to permanent housing. By doing so, the homeless individual does not have to focus on their housing but instead their treatment, so they are directly on the path toward rehabilitation.⁵ The Housing First theory allows the tenant to make individual choices which likely leads them to remain housed and improve their way of life. The tenant makes the option to ask for help coping with and recovering from alcoholism, drug addiction, mental illness, as well as applying for jobs.⁶

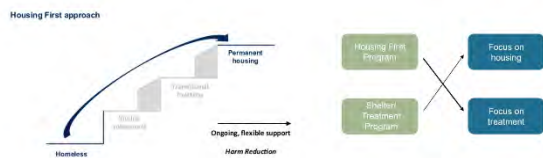


Figure 2: Housing First Approach illustrated by Benjamin Henwood (Henwood, 2014)

What makes this project so successful is giving the tenant stability and housing first. Each tenant has their own private living space. Figures 3 and 4, compare The Massachusetts Legal Clinic for the Homeless, a well-established shelter in the New England Region, and the Jimmy Heath House. As shown in Figure 3, the shelter is condensed, and every cot is numbered only allowing the homeless individual to have their belongings under their bed and around it. As for the Jimmy Heath House, the individual has a personal kitchen, drawers and bathroom

to promote independence and an ability to survive in society. Without this stability, a homeless person has a harder time recovering, because they do not know where they are sleeping or staying safe at night. Since the opening of the Jimmy Heath house, the use of emergency rooms was reduced, contact with the police, jail, and the criminal justice system has greatly decreased. Churches, colleges, and civic groups engage with the residents and provides meals for the men.



Figure 3: The Massachusetts Legal Clinic for the Homeless (Hilary Vaught. "Kindness Matters, and Other Lessons Learned at New England's Largest Homeless Shelter.")

Figure 4: The Jimmy Heath House one bedroom ("Jimmy Heath House," CUDA Studio)

³ (Over-the-Rhine Foundation)

⁴ ("Jimmy Heath House," CUDA Studio)

⁵ (Henwood, 2014)

⁶ (Housing First, 2016)

Case Study #2: The Prince George Hotel in New York City



Figure 5: Front Façade of the Prince George Hotel
(Breaking Ground, “The Prince George”)

In 1901, the Prince George Hotel was a luxury hotel on East Twenty-eighth Street with one of the biggest ballrooms in New York City. Around the 1980s, the hotel started to lose its luxurious appeal, and became suited for affordable housing for the area.⁷ High crime and prostitution resulted in the closure of the facility in 1990. Nine years later, Breaking Ground, a nonprofit organization that helps create permanent housing for the homeless in New York City, decided to renovate and preserve the hotel into affordable housing for low income and formerly homeless individuals living with HIV/AIDS.

Breaking Ground has nearly 4,000 units of housing across New York City, upstate New York, and Connecticut. The program serves more than 8,000 New Yorkers through street outreach, transitional housing, and permanent, supportive and affordable housing.⁸ The Prince George Hotel provides 416 individual studio units. In Sam Davis book, *Designing for the Homeless: Architecture That Works* (2005), shown in Figure 6, his illustrations of the Prince George Hotel floor plans show how each

homeless individual has personal space, break out areas to interact with each other, and **spaces that focus directly on the residents’ rehabilitation process.**

Since the renovation, surrounding buildings have become an ideal place to live. The hotel is near Madison Square Garden, so many investors have tried to buy out Breaking Ground, but they are not interested in selling. Having the homeless in a better part of town is beneficial to their rehabilitation, and enables them to be in contact with a greater part of New York’s community. **Preservation of the hotel** was a great benefit to Breaking Ground and New York City. Using an existing beautiful landmark building helped reduce the stigma of a homeless shelter. This is another reason why using existing infrastructure instead of building new can result in a successful project.



Figure 6: Floor Plans of the Prince George Hotel from *Designing for the Homeless: Architecture that works* by Sam Davis (2005)

⁷ (Davis, 2005)

⁸ (Breaking Ground, “The Prince George”)

Case Study #3: Skid Row Simon Hotel in Los Angeles



Figure 7: Simon Hotel, Skid Row Trust
 ("Simone Hotel Apartments." Skid Row Housing Trust)

Los Angeles has an average of over 36,000 people unsheltered.⁹ Skid Row is a Los Angeles district made of 54 blocks, where the largest population of homeless live.¹⁰ In 1989, the Skid Row Trust was founded to provide permanent supportive housing for people experiencing homelessness, prolonged extreme poverty, poor health, disabilities, mental illness, and addiction.¹¹

The trust has 22 assistance properties within the 54-block radius. The Simon Hotel was renovated in 2018 by Koning Eizenberg Architecture to create 115 studios units, health clinics, and supportive/program spaces for the homeless. The Skid Row trust has similar values as the Jimmy Heath House, following the Housing First Model, but also use the Harm Reduction Model which is a set of practical strategies and ideas aimed at reducing negative consequences associated with drug use.¹² The Harm Reduction Model promotes helping individuals where they are, since not everyone

is capable of stopping their substance abuse at a given time.¹³ This approach focuses on methods for reducing harm and associated health risks, by providing medical care, disease prevention, and education to addiction treatment.¹⁴ The benefits of the Harm Reduction approach are: the prevention of spreading infectious diseases such as hepatitis, HIV and AIDS; offering non-judgment and assistance to

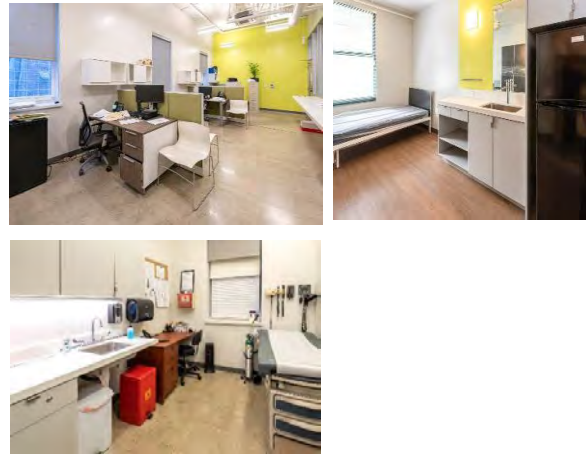


Figure 8: Simon Hotel, Program/ Support Staff
 Figure 9: Simon Hotel, Efficiency Studio
 Figure 10: Simon Hotel, Clinic
 ("Simone Hotel Apartments." Skid Row Housing Trust)

their drug problem, prevention of overdoses; and increased safety of the community.¹⁵ The Housing First and Harm Reduction Models pair well, because after providing housing for homeless individuals it is important to have programs available to increase the likelihood of a successful rehabilitation. The Simon Hotel allows the homeless individual to feel the security of a home and a safe environment with supportive programs and medical attention. These securities enable a healthy recovery from the psychological, mental, and physical health issues that result from living on the streets. The Harm Reduction approach is a possible strategy for helping the homeless in Clarksburg, WV.

Summary of Case Studies

The Jimmy Heath House, The Prince George Hotel, and The Simon Hotel are successful adaptive-reuse projects that concentrate on recycling, reusing, and repurposing buildings and giving them a new-found purpose. Adaptive-reuse is more economical and more

⁹ (Henry, 2020)

¹⁰ (Martinez, 2015)

¹¹ ("Simone Hotel Apartments." Skid Row Housing Trust)

¹² ("Principles of Harm Reduction." Harm Reduction Coalition)

¹³ ("Harm Reduction." Recovery Research Institute)

¹⁴ IBID.

¹⁵ IBID.

sustainable. In case of failure or outgrowth of the tenant or company, it will not create a new vacant building.

Adapting existing buildings into new spaces can be challenging, especially a design that focuses on homeless individuals. Using existing buildings instead of creating new buildings is a better strategy for creating supportive housing for the homeless since there is limited funding, community involvement, and real estate space within a city. Choosing a more sustainable practice, such as adaptive-reuse, as permanent housing for the homeless creates greater chance for success. Demolishing a site to make a new building could ruin the integrity, memory, and authenticity of the site chosen. The prior case studies architecturally expressed the importance of keeping authentic buildings within a city, because those buildings enrich the **city and keep the city's history.**

Discussion

These three case studies show options that Clarksburg could consider to address homelessness. To create a successful architectural design in Clarksburg for supportive housing for the homeless, a program or model must have a path to rehabilitation. A combination of the Housing First and the Harm Reduction approaches would be a beneficial approach since Clarksburg experiences an abundance of opioid and alcohol addiction. Allowing the homeless to have housing with the offer of help, could hasten their recovery. Adopting a program like the Housing First approach could reduce chronic homelessness in Clarksburg.

Affordable housing is a major issue within the United States, making it difficult for low-income **people to find shelter. From the 1960's, the beginning of the affordable housing crisis was due to cutbacks in government funding, urban development within the city, and zoning laws in the United States. The use of pre-existing buildings to design affordable low-income and permanent housing for the homeless could help lessen the issue of the affordable housing crisis and solve the abandonment of buildings.**

Another issue that has resulted in a larger population of homelessness is gentrification, which is urban development within cities caused by wealthier individuals moving in and improving housing and businesses, while

displacing current residents. Not all cities are allowing gentrification. Chicago, Illinois and Houston, Texas took control of property and began their own community-owned housing development strategies. In Woodlawn, Chicago the Department of Housing (DOH) convened a Woodlawn Housing Working Group to bring residents, renters, and homeowners to create a Woodlawn Affordable Housing Preservation Ordinance.¹⁶ This Ordinance helps strengthen the community and ensure Woodlawn residents would not become subjected to gentrification. Houston created its own Community Land Trust to make homeownership more affordable for those who are lower-income.¹⁷

A failure to acknowledge or fix the housing crisis, has caused homelessness to become a severe problem throughout the United States. Short-term efforts to help homeless individuals such as missions and halfway houses will not end chronic homelessness. Rather, permanent housing and supportive living environments that ensure skill building, is more likely to reduce the homeless population, and hopefully it will become obsolete.

The Coronavirus (COVID-19) deeply affected the homeless population in the United States. A global pandemic arose, and a majority of state and local governments required social distancing, at home isolation, nonessential business and schools to close, and non-essential employees to work from home. The homeless are very vulnerable to being infected by the virus, because they do not have the luxury of isolating at home. Maintaining good hygiene is very challenging since businesses, restaurants, and parks have closed. Some resort to bathing in public fountains, subways, and park restrooms in larger cities. Shelters and local charities may supply them with hygiene products but that is not always the case. Food banks are working with shelters to help feed and support homeless individuals, but are struggling to keep food and cleaning supplies available and the homeless socially distanced. Recent impacts from COVID-19 have highlighted the importance of creating personal spaces for each homeless individual.

Some local governments have made an effort to open vacant hotels for the homeless. For example, Governor Gavin Newsom of California is acquiring 15,000 hotel rooms to house the

¹⁶ ("Woodlawn Community Development," 2019)

¹⁷ (Binkovitz, 2018)

homeless.¹⁸ As of April 23, 2020, more than 26 million Americans have filed initial unemployment claims during the COVID-19 pandemic.¹⁹ Unemployment is one of the factors that lead to homelessness. The United States must realize the importance of long-term supportive housing for the homeless, and give more funding to HUD and provide housing subsidy programs.

Conclusion

It is important to take action to resolve the homelessness issues. Larger cities have been trying to resolve homelessness, but smaller, rural towns still lack the ability to support and protect homeless individuals. Today, **Clarksburg's overpopulation of missions and halfway houses** have resulted in homeless persons overtaking abandoned buildings. On July 1, 2020, Clarksburg officials announced a new House Bill that would allow officers to arrest individuals if they find a trespasser on city or county-confirmed abandoned property. The arrest will be made if the trespasser is seen at the structure after a first offense. Once the trespasser is in custody, they can face up to six months in jail and a fine of about \$100. To avoid jail time, those in custody can agree to join a community corrections program if they require help.²⁰ This bill is the first step to help secure the community but is not the first step to help these homeless individuals. The area requires help to preserve these once beautiful, 19th-century buildings into usable space for the homeless, and serve as a stepping stone for the homeless to lead a more stable and accountable life.

Previous case studies, research, and observations demonstrate why the preservation of existing infrastructure within Clarksburg can help prevent and reduce social and economic issues within the city.

Homelessness is an issue not only in Clarksburg but also throughout the United States. Creating permanent housing for the homeless will reduce **a community's social and economic** burdens and make a safer environment and get the homeless off the streets. There would be a reduction in hospital care, overcrowded correctional systems, and police resources responding to events in the community. Designing affordable, permanent, and supportive housing to

accommodate our most vulnerable neighbors will lessen the social and economic issues faced when redeveloping, preserving, and reusing infrastructure within a city.

Proposal

Previous case studies, research, recent events of COVID-19, and the analysis of Clarksburg, WV influenced the program and design of the facility proposed. After research and analysis my thoughts evolved into reimagining facilities that will serve people who are experiencing homelessness and foster their independence through socialization and avoidance of stigma. This facility will assist women in unsafe environments and circumstances, deliver to them a safe environment where they and their children can reside. Through social services, rehabilitation and a network of support, these women, mothers and their children will be integrating into society. This facility, services and public amenities will be established to ensure a safe haven and promote the good health and overall wellbeing of each woman so she can become self-sufficient and contribute to the community in a meaningful way. **A woman who is in harm's way will be offered an opportunity to have attain peace of mind.**

The principles and strategies within the program are to:

- Avoid stigma through Integration - public and private
- Support and enable Wellbeing - implementing supportive programs such as health care, day care services, counseling, and therapy.
- Offer Education and Workforce programs - study pods to encourage continued education, multiple workforce opportunities for job placement: salon, health center, restaurant, convenience store, etc.

These principles and strategies build upon one another to become stepping stones for the women in the facility to gain independence. Once women are ready to transition out of the program, they will have a new-developed confidence to live independently and thrive among their new community.

This facility supports single women, mothers, and their children who are experiencing

¹⁸ (The Associated Press, 2020)

¹⁹ (*More Than 26 Million Americans File for Unemployment Amid Coronavirus Outbreak*, 2020)

²⁰ Wdvt, 2020

homelessness. Providing housing first, educational and workforce programs, and mental and physical support, this program is meant for these women and moms to have a safe place to reside until they are able to live within a socially-developed environment on their own.

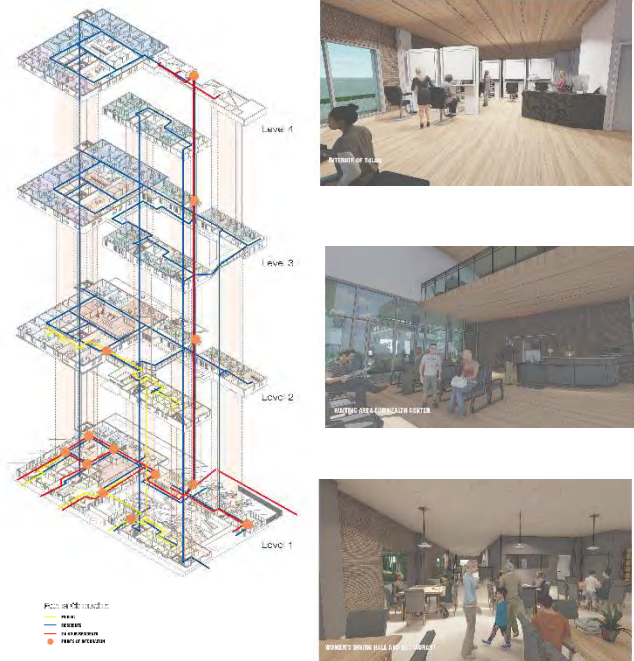
The design addresses homelessness as a means of preserving the urban fabric, so when choosing a site, it was important to have a site that already had a connection to the deep history of Clarksburg, WV. This design could **become an integral part of the city's effort** to revitalize the once vital and productive area of Clarksburg, WV. The area chosen is Glen Elk which was one of the first settled areas in Clarksburg. Today, Glen Elk is a lower income area and is where the current mission is located. The location of the new site is 408 N. 6th Street.

In 1915, 408 N. 6th Street was constructed to be the Wholesale Morris Grocery store and then became known as the Central Storage Company warehouse. Beside the building is an old mill that is vacant and a parking lot on the other side. So, by connecting the buildings and making a green space between them could create a perfect environment to house single women and mothers who are experiencing homelessness or in an abusive home and offer them therapeutic and rehabilitation services, educational and workforce programs, and a health clinic.



To avoid stigma, it is important that these women have healthy interactions and are slowly integrated back into society. The graduating programs will help to ensure they are transitioned from the facility back into a communities, neighborhoods and safe homes. This facility has public amenities that benefit the health and wellbeing of the residents as well as

the community. These amenities are known as **the "spine of rehabilitation"** which include a salon, restaurant, and health center. These amenities are not only used by the women but they can also become places of temporary employment for these women. Workforce programs include the public amenities but also are helping with the maintenance and cleaning



of the facility, as well as a convenient store on the first level. **The "path of integration"** illustrates the circulation pattern of how public, residents, and 24-hour residents interact with one another in areas within the facility.

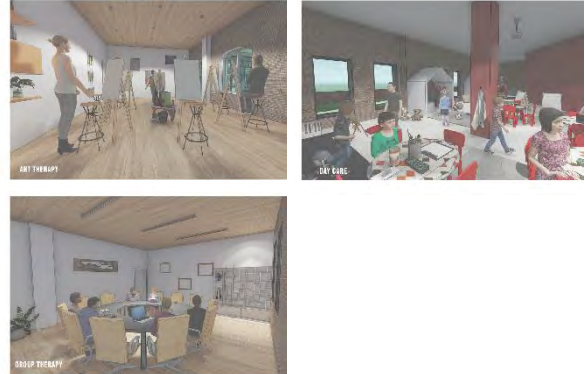
The 24-hour residents are women who may be temporarily passing through Clarksburg or women living in their cars. Within the facility are carpools to allow them to park overnight so they are in a safe environment instead of being in an unsafe, dimly lit parking lot or street. Research shows there are only a few places to allow women to shower, do laundry for free, and have a place to relax for a short while. This facility allows a woman to temporarily park, take a hot shower, do laundry, have a healthy meal, and move on to a final destination. This design will truly meet women where they are at and offer them the opportunity to access a safe place.

Another element within the design is a center courtyard. The three buildings of the facility circulate **around the "garden of reconciliation,"** which is a courtyard for the women and children to enjoy and interact with one another. On the roof top of the east wing is also a garden space for a more intimate and quieter place for women

to have a place of refuge and reflect on their experiences before and at the facility.



Supportive programs within the facility are multiple types of therapy spaces such as group therapy, individual counseling, art therapy, etc. Mothers also have the support of child development services within the facility so they are able to get individual support or are able to work within or outside of the facility with knowing their child is safe and cared for.



The recent pandemic COVID-19 has shown the importance of individual living spaces. This facility can house about 60 women. Units include a recovery unit on the second level and next to the supportive programs and direct access to the health center. These units are for women who may be struggling with mental health, substance abuse, domestic violence, etc. These women are surrounded and supported by health officials and staff so they feel safe and protected in their environment. The other three types of units are on the third and fourth floors, which are a single, two-bedroom and three-bedroom units. The two-bedroom could serve as a unit for two single women or a mother with one child. The three bedroom is reserved for a mother with two or more children.



Available information shows the facility and amenities could present security issues. The public amenities are separated from the residents and it is the resident's choice to be in the public areas if they feel safe to do so. There are transition areas within the facility separate from the public spaces. Within the transition space is a relaxation area including a kitchenette, laundry facilities, and the staff members' offices. This allows the residents to interact with the staff and also feel safe.

This facility has the ability to meet women and mothers where they are, and help them become independent and stable within a socially-developed environment. As Clarksburg

successfully implements the design and program with the support programs, public amenities, and workforce could be implemented in other areas of West Virginia.

This program illustrates the importance of socialization and avoidance of stigma and implementing services that allow these women to interact with the public and work within the facility. This program is different from other shelters, because it is not isolated or ignored by the community. These amenities benefit the community and the residents. Integrating the residents with the community can allow these women to meet local residents, employers, school board members, and have positive interaction with local law enforcement. This healthy interaction with town members is all necessary to becoming part of a new community. If this strategy is implemented in other facilities, it could truly help avoid stigma and decrease the number of individuals experiencing homelessness. This design is very important especially in 2021 where unemployment is at an all time high because of COVID-19. The United States needs to address the increasing numbers of individuals experiencing homelessness and implement programs that help communities around the United States that are impacted by this. This design indicates how using existing infrastructures of vacant warehouses could be readapted into transitional housing for these individuals and could become the stepping stones of a national plan.



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