



The Alcott Center

Homekey Commerce

Commerce, CA



Project Description

The Homekey Commerce site is an 80-unit converted motel in the city of Commerce, immediately off Interstate 710 (I-710), surrounded by commercial and industrial zones. The building is one of 10 Los Angeles County Homekey 1.0 sites. In addition to its larger size relative to other Homekey-assisted hotel/motel acquisitions, the project is notable in that it is one of the few program examples across the county that went straight to permanent supportive housing (PSH) during the first round of funding, as the others are nearly all functioning as interim housing (with an expectation to convert to PSH within five years). The site was built in the 1990's and was reported to be in good physical condition at the time that Alcott Center took over operations and property management functions in January 2021, with occupancy commencing in March 2021.

SNAPSHOT	
Project Name:	Homekey Commerce (formerly a Studio 6 motel)
Owner:	Los Angeles County
Operator:	Alcott Center
Lead Service Provider:	Exodus Recovery Services
Target Population:	Chronically Homeless
Number of Units :	80 units
Building Type :	Extended Stay Motel
Program Type:	Permanent Supportive Housing
Site Acquisition & Renovations Cost:	\$16,300,000 (approximately)
Total Cost Per Unit :	\$204,000



Like other Homekey sites, tenant eligibility is targeted to households experiencing homelessness who are dually at risk of COVID exposure. The operating budget is supported with project-based vouchers through the county’s housing authority, the Los Angeles County Development Authority (LACDA). Similar to other Homekey 1.0 sites under the county’s purview, the building was first acquired through the LA County Chief Executive Office in 2020. Utilities, like water, internet, and cable, are included in the rents, which was identified as a big factor in attracting and retaining tenants. There is a food pantry onsite for residents and a community garden adjacent to the property.

Beyond its uniqueness regionally as a direct PSH conversion, there are two other notable distinctions. For one, Homekey Commerce exemplifies the types of interagency collaboration between community-based organizations and local government that Homekey has helped to facilitate. The LA County Department of Health Services (DHS), Alcott Center, and Exodus Recovery Center (Exodus) collaborate around the shared purpose to deliver quality supportive services.

Such services are funded with Measure H dollars and managed by DHS, with Exodus providing intensive case management services (ICMS) onsite. The site’s service and operational philosophy is also unique. The project is one of a few in the region that is beginning to deploy a so-called “trauma-informed property management” model. Though trauma-informed care (or TIC) has been established as a PSH supportive services best practice and is increasingly widespread throughout Los Angeles County, the application of the TIC model within the property management discipline is novel; its success requires elevated coordination and joint decision-making between property management and the supportive services team, in recognition of the health and housing stability barriers endemic to serving a high-acute, homeless population.



Operations and Services

Project partners take pride in fostering a sense of community, consistent with the trauma-informed property management model. The Alcott Center meets residents “where they are at,” manifested in a higher tolerance approach to resident engagement and building management when addressing tenant behaviors, late rent payments, leasing and house rule fidelity and violations, and compliance with COVID-19 protocols.

The staffing structure is divided across property management, security, and supportive service case management functions. Property management is stationed in the lobby and a back office. There is a 24/7 onsite property manager as well as two security guards in the event of an emergency and to monitor the property. The Exodus ICMS program assists in systems navigation and wraparound supportive services. Exodus has two onsite confidential areas for tenant services, to facilitate benefits assistance, securing food, financial management, securing eligibility documents to facilitate housing placements, and as tenants settle in, to establish rapport within the community.

Prior to the site’s acquisition through Homekey, it was known in the community as a “party scene.” Since Alcott took over the property, they have focused on beautification efforts, such as building a garden on one side of the building for residents to grow fresh food. The parking was underutilized initially since many residents do not have a vehicle, so they have adapted the lot for resident programming activities, for example distributing pantry boxes, and administering COVID vaccines. Referrals to the site come through the regional Coordinated Entry System (CES,) with tenant screening coordinated among Exodus, the LACDA, and the Alcott Center.

Site Selection and Rehabilitation

The Los Angeles County Chief Executive Office’s Homeless Initiative and Asset Management Branch and the Department of Public Works (DPW) played a role in site selection and rehabilitation. The purchase price was close to \$15 million. County staff noted that the primary appeal of the site was that it was an extended stay motel, thereby limiting conversion needs and costs and due to its layout and unit amenities. Targeting such a site meant higher per unit costs, in contrast to other potential hotel/motel acquisitions that would require more adaptations, but that expense was mitigated by the reduced need for deeper rehab to make it compatible for long-term use as a PSH property. Five units were converted to meet federal (ADA) accessibility standards, which included widening hallways for wheelchair access and installing railings in the bathrooms. The total renovation costs are estimated at \$1.3 million though not all of the work is complete. The scope of physical improvements involved plumbing, electrical (wiring and panels), fire alarm upgrades, roofing, and security (electronic door fob). The DPW managed most of the repairs and met regularly with Alcott Center and Exodus staff to communicate and plan rehab schedules to ensure the work did not interfere with residents and interrupt resident services.



Key Takeaways

There are several takeaways from the Homekey Commerce project that reflect the challenges and successes inherent in operationalizing a Homekey site, especially one that is forging new ground with a trauma-informed property management model and distinctive for its heightened degree of interagency collaboration, even for PSH. Perhaps the most impressive aspect of the project is that, within months of acquisition, this site was functional as permanent housing for households exiting homelessness, a feat that could not be achieved so rapidly through almost any other means outside of the hotel acquisition model. Such an outcome speaks to the power of the Homekey program as a unique and expeditious tool for PSH unit creation.

Though the site is just past a year since rehab and operations commenced officially, success thus far has been dependent on intense communication and alignment among project partners, from coordinating the physical improvements to managing the lease-up phase. Establishing ground rules and expectations for partners was critical at the outset. Meetings were held weekly to help keep everyone updated regarding project upgrades, service delivery, and leasing progress and troubleshooting, as needed. Interviews with project partners also reaffirmed the positive impact of the trauma informed property management approach on building a sense of community. Alcott Center pointed out that Homekey Commerce is not business as usual; they are quite active with resident engagement and make sure to check in with tenants who may be living alone for the first time. According to the Director of Interim Housing, “we are concerned about loneliness in a non-congregate setting. Sometimes the residents who are quiet need just as much attention.”

Naturally, the site has also experienced its fair share of challenges along the way. The location, for instance, is directly adjacent to the Harbor Freeway (I-710), so the Alcott Center is working with the city of Commerce to put up a barrier to ease traffic concerns. On a different note, Alcott Center described experiences with individuals wandering around the site that do not necessarily have an affiliation with the program or a current resident. Such situations are fairly common around PSH properties, especially with the degree of unsheltered homelessness across Los Angeles and the connections that “housed” clients have to that community. Alcott Center has worked to assist unhoused individuals with food and emergency housing connections while ensuring security and safety for residents. Also, consistent with other industry experiences during the pandemic, it has been challenging to attract and retain quality staff, but Alcott Center has been able remarkably to withstand these pressures and keep and sustain personnel to ensure the property continues to operate smoothly. Finally, the challenge of taking over Homekey operations and converting directly to PSH meant that the motel had some existing occupants that could not be relocated prior to the program’s launch, though the operator is working to find permanent housing for these households. These experiences further reaffirm the consensus preference among Homekey operators to secure sites that are unoccupied to avoid the complications associated with occupied rehabilitation, relocation, and community building.

About Enterprise

Enterprise is a national nonprofit that exists to make a good home possible for the millions of families without one. We support community development organizations on the ground, aggregate and invest capital for impact, advance housing policy at every level of government, and build and manage communities ourselves. Since 1982, we have invested \$44 billion and created 781,000 homes across all 50 states –all to make home and community places of pride, power and belonging. Join us at enterprisecommunity.org.

About the Alcott Center

The Alcott’s Center mission is to enhance the quality of life and empower individuals faced with mental health and housing challenges as they transition toward wellness. The Alcott Center for Mental Health Services recognizes that mental health is multi-faceted and that housing plays an immense role in an individual’s mental health. For that reason, the Alcott Center launched and continues to expand supportive housing projects and utilizes trauma-informed property management to help community members maintain housing. Learn more at alcottcenter.org.