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Colopy: Why Project Homekey, Roomkey are important in reducing homelessness

By [CONTRIBUTING WRITER](#) | |

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Kelly Colopy, director of the Long Beach Department of Health and Human Services. (Photo courtesy of the City of Long Beach)



At the outset of the COVID-19 pandemic, we had to change the way we shelter people who are experiencing homelessness. We reduced capacity at our winter shelter to allow for physical distancing and opened temporary shelters at Silverado Park and Martin Luther King Jr., Park to accommodate the shift. We were able to use motel vouchers to isolate people who needed to quarantine or isolate.

Then, on March 18, 2020, the California Legislature approved funding for Project Roomkey, which was quickly followed by Project Homekey – fundamentally shifting the way we've been able to approach interim housing.

By now, many have heard the term interim housing, but might not know quite what that is, or how it differs from other forms of shelter.

Project Homekey and Project Roomkey are both forms of interim (or temporary) housing. This interim housing offers a low-barrier opportunity for participants to stay until they are able to find permanent housing. When we say low barrier, it means there are few restrictions for those who enter. Rather than requiring proof of sobriety or having mental health conditions fully under control before entering housing, we offer housing first.

The stability and safety of interim housing allows people room to breathe, which also creates an environment in which people are ready to accept services. Both Roomkey and Homekey offer individual rooms, also called non-congregate housing, providing extra security for people for whom group shelters are not a good fit.

Our Project Roomkey sites consist of leased non-congregate living spaces at motels for 70 people, and Project Homekey consists of one city-owned and two county-owned interim housing sites for 274 individuals or couples.

And there is exciting news to share on that front – the State Department of Housing and Community Development has just awarded our health department a \$30.5 million grant to create more interim housing. These dollars will fund the development of 30 to 35 modular units, or tiny homes, at the city's Multi-Service Center location and will allow Long Beach to buy another motel to convert to temporary housing. The grant will also provide funding for operations and services at both sites.

The Project Roomkey and Project Homekey sites both feature private rooms and supportive services, including daily meals, transportation to essential appointments, accommodation for service/emotional support animals, mental and physical health services, client-centered case management, individual stability plans, employment development and programs to help survivors of domestic violence.

The participants are also offered stress and anger management classes, health education and wellness, and substance-use disorder services. Both prioritize people who are experiencing



Participants must follow a set of low-barrier guidelines to help them prepare for housing, and most participants stay as long as there is a bed available for them.

Over time, participants develop friendships with their neighbors, which creates a sense of community at our sites. We are seeing participants empower and encourage others to thrive as well, giving hope that soon they can find a more permanent place to call home.

In the meantime, this is their home.

While some people do not succeed in Homekey and Roomkey, most find that the stability gives them a chance to make positive change, and many participants in this program are able to obtain an Emergency Housing Voucher, which matches qualifying participants to permanent housing with case management and other support.

Others have trauma and other issues to untangle during their stay. For those who struggle, the system of case management provides support and second chances.

Yet others have complex needs within the program, like the participant who we will refer to as E.F. E.F. was one of the first clients at Project Homekey to receive her emergency housing voucher. She is the grandmother to a 12-year-old who lost his parent during the pandemic. Case managers were able to help her secure a two-bedroom apartment and support her while she sought legal guardianship of her grandchild. Even after leaving Project Homekey, she came back to visit and continues keeping us up to date on her progress.

Last month, she secured legal guardianship and brought him to live with her. I couldn't be prouder of the team that assisted in this complex housing – and emotionally distressing – situation. But at the end of the day, all our team did was empower E.F. We showed her a way forward and she took the opportunity.

In late 2020, the city opened the Atlantic Bridge Housing Community, which, like our winter shelter, provides temporary congregate lodging. This more traditional setup continues to be critical in many people's lives as they work toward permanent housing.

But what Projects Homekey and Roomkey have shown us is that we need a mix of housing opportunities, and that we need to continue to be creative and evolve.

As we find new ways to engage people in our community who are experiencing homelessness, we continue to seek and be open to new ideas, as there are many paths to healing, growth and permanent housing.

Kelly Colopy is the director of the Long Beach Department of Health and Human Services.

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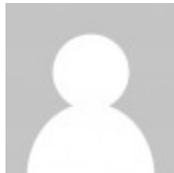
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