



## Interim Housing Solutions

*Photo of DignityMoves, Downtown Santa Barbara*

### **Navigating California's Housing Conundrum: Pioneering Interim Housing Solutions**

In California, the term "housing crisis" has become so ubiquitous that it elicits little more than a resigned nod from residents. Characterized by soaring home prices and a scarcity of affordable housing, this crisis is a complex web of factors. It results from an ever-increasing demand for housing due to population growth, restricted housing supply exacerbated by zoning regulations, stringent building codes, and the NIMBY (Not In My Backyard) opposition to new housing developments. Escalating construction costs, in tandem with surging land prices, have made the creation of affordable housing units an arduous task. Furthermore, income inequality and stagnant wages have compounded the burden, leaving a substantial portion of the population grappling with housing insecurity, homelessness, or the weight of exorbitant housing costs.

In the realm of homeless services, our primary focus gravitates towards those who are or will soon be homeless. At Dorothy's Place, we narrow our lens to those who confront us daily - the individuals camped on the side of the highway or pushing shopping carts brimming with found items down Main Street. These are individuals bearing the heavy weight of trauma and unique needs. Our mission is to provide them with the safety and security they need to engage with service providers, enabling their successful transition into permanent and sustainable housing. However, one pressing question persists: where is the safe, low-cost housing? It is imperative that we engage in a pragmatic discussion and identify common-sense solutions.

Enter the concept of interim housing, an innovative solution poised to redefine the landscape of homeless services. Interim housing, while not a novel term, has remained somewhat elusive, lacking a universally accepted definition. For our purposes, we define interim housing as a short-term housing alternative, distinct from emergency shelters and permanent housing structures. This housing model offers a rapid path to secure, safe housing compared to conventional construction, with just a fraction of the costs. It provides a critical space for individuals to stabilize and heal from the traumas of homelessness before transitioning into permanent housing.

Housing First, a nationally recognized best practice, prioritizes permanent housing over other needs, such as income and substance use issues, in assisting individuals out of homelessness. We echo the sentiment that every person deserves the security of a permanent home and appreciate the shift in focus among service providers and funding organizations. However, our experience underscores the significance of the duration of time spent on the streets in affecting the difficulty of transitioning back to independent housing. It is often an arduous process, and some individuals may not be prepared for the swiftness required to reacquire independent living skills, such as self-care routines, bill payments, and time management. Some who have endured years of unsheltered

living may require permanent supportive or government-funded housing. Nevertheless, not all unsheltered individuals necessitate this level of housing, and research suggests that many can "self-resolve" when given the opportunity.

The logistical challenges faced by homeless individuals are immense. To reach an appointment while camping, without running water, internet access, or transportation, and with the need to bring all camping gear and personal belongings, is a formidable task. As a result, many of our clients miss scheduled appointments due to these overwhelming barriers. Congregate shelters, while an option, are available for specific hours and often lack secure storage facilities. Many individuals refuse shelter stays due to concerns about personal safety, the inability to keep a pet, or a general lack of privacy.

Interim housing effectively addresses these issues by providing a blend of stability and support that aids individuals in recovering from the trauma of homelessness. It offers a flexible length of stay with a focus on progression towards permanent housing, ensuring private personal spaces with locking doors and community guidelines that prioritize safety over arbitrary rules, such as curfews. We advocate for the creation of small, compassionate interim housing communities, where each individual is enveloped by expert assistance within a safe and supportive environment.



One compelling aspect of interim housing is its cost-effectiveness. In contrast to the staggering average cost of \$650,000 to build a single unit of permanent supportive housing, interim housing units typically cost \$50,000-\$70,000 to construct. Moreover, interim housing communities can be established within 6-8 months, as witnessed in cities across California, including Santa Barbara, San Francisco, and Rohnert Park<sup>i</sup>. While they have a 20-year life expectancy, these units can be dismantled and reassembled as per community needs, offering an agile solution. Interim housing may not be the panacea for homelessness, but it effectively complements prevention strategies and permanent housing solutions.

Dorothy's Place boasts a commendable history of providing transitional housing, featuring 24 secure single-bedroom units with communal dining, restrooms, and recreation areas. Residents benefit from dedicated support, including expert case managers, healthcare coordinators, and housing navigators. They find the support of their neighbors valuable, comfortable sharing their past barriers with people that have similar lived experience. Our remarkable 74% success rate in transitioning residents to permanent housing is fortified by offering a year of ongoing support after securing permanent housing.

Interim housing stands as a commonsense, adaptable, portable, and cost-effective solution that acknowledges the fundamental challenges faced by chronically unsheltered individuals. It fills the crucial gap for the next decade while affordable permanent housing projects are realized, offering a beacon of hope for those grappling with housing insecurity and homelessness.

Citations:

*The Role of Interim Housing as a Homelessness Response* by Ken Kirkey, Chief Partnership Officer, All Home, posted October 5, 2022, <https://www.allhomeca.org/2022/10/05/the-role-of-interim-housing-as-a-homelessness-response/>

*Reimagining Interim Housing: Transforming our Approaches to Sheltering People*, The Framework for an Equitable Homelessness Response Project, <https://housingequityframework.org/reimagininginterimhousing>

<sup>i</sup> To learn more about interim housing projects in California, check out [www.dignitymoves.org](http://www.dignitymoves.org)