

Lower Polk Community Benefit District

INNOVATION

The program's purpose is to help people keep their homes through collaborative efforts rooted in a positive tenant-landlord relationship. Rather than debating "rights" or the law, the focus is on mutual interests, concerns, and civility. This approach transforms conflict into collaboration, with positive effects rippling into the community at large. When designing the Tenant Landlord Clinic (TLC), we conducted research on the root causes of tenant displacement. We determined that the main cause is not an increase in new buildings. Rather, it is simply the decrease of existing at-risk populations. The people lost via displacement are the very people who give a neighborhood its unique flavor, vibrant street life and authentic sense of place. Such at-risk people may include artists, immigrants, small business owners, retirees and other people living on low or fixed incomes. In addition to facing the challenges of living on a low income in San Francisco, these people often face additional challenges. These may include multiple combinations of poverty, disability, addiction and other behavioral health challenges. Further complicating matters, immigration or ESL status often also play roles. People facing these challenges generally lack awareness of / access to resources. Even when access is available, people facing these challenges frequently face barriers to communication. At the most basic level, the TLC works by removing or mitigating these barriers and challenges. It also ensures that both tenants and landlords are aware that there is a robust coalition of community stakeholders already involved in the process if the issue is not resolved amicably.

OUTCOME

The impact of the TLC has been excellent. In our first year of operation, we assisted 87 people who faced an imminent threat of eviction. All remain in their homes today. We provided coaching and referrals to 93 additional residents, including landlords who contacted us before a dispute spiraled out of control. These results exceeded our most optimistic projections, and indicate that our coalition is truly helping to prevent homelessness. The vulnerable people who benefit from this project would inevitably face homelessness and housing insecurity upon eviction. Program benefits extend beyond those whose homes have been saved. People with shelter are much less likely to require emergency services or be crime victims. We are also helping to decrease the load on the community's already overburdened housing crisis and social safety net systems. A secondary, and more subtle, impact of TLC has been to reinforce our values and reputation as a community benefit district that works to serve the interests of all people in our unique community. The TLC is an ongoing project which relies on funding from the City of San Francisco. Our funding was recently extended for another year, and it is our hope that this funding stream will continue.

EXECUTION

As an ongoing project, the TLC is constantly in the execution phase. Leading up to the launch of this project, we conducted extensive research into the root causes of homelessness and displacement. After conducting this research, we assembled a list of desired service offerings, and reached out to local providers who had a reputation as being among the best of their kind. The providers we currently work with are: The Bar Association of San Francisco's Conflict Intervention Service; La Voz Latina (a place-based community group); Hastings College of the Law; and The San Francisco Apartment Owners Association. The steps leading up to the ongoing execution of this project included: (1) writing a proposal, (2) securing funding, (3) reaching out to service providers, and (4) negotiating memorandums of agreement.

REPRESENTATION

By design, purpose and intent, the program is highly inclusive. Our clients come from a wide array of backgrounds, ethnicities, life-histories, etc. Our only limitations (and these are funding-based) are that our clients must reside in the general Lower Polk community, and must report a lower income. As mentioned above, we partner with four organizations, and also work with the City of San Francisco to operate and sustain this ongoing program.

REPLICATION

This model is easy to replicate and relatively inexpensive. Once someone becomes homeless, it is very hard to get that person back off the street. Because people who are homeless often face challenges around mental illness and/or substance abuse, they typically require intensive treatment. Such treatment is often severely lacking or non-existent in homeless shelters and other similar ad hoc solutions. If someone is still currently housed, then city, county, state and federal resources (such as in home care) can be brought to bear where that person resides. Because such programs are place-based, they are ideal for business improvement districts, and similar organizations, to facilitate. City-wide social service programs often face challenges when it comes to knowing where special help is needed. As a place-based organization we were able to organize and convene a coalition and bring them together. Through daily interaction with the community, we are uniquely qualified to identify those in need of assistance and refer them to the right partner in the coalition.

COMPLEXITY/SIMPLICITY

The most complex thing about the TLC is making sure that all of the moving parts are moving correctly. This is inherent in any organization that is coalition-based. This complexity is impossible to escape, since the coalition aspect of the TLC is what makes it powerful. No one group exists that has all of the resources needed to do what we do. We mitigate this complexity by keeping communication open among and between all coalition members. We hold regular in-person and telephonic meetings to assess status and plan forward.