

HILLVIEW

MENTAL HEALTH CENTER, INC.

SPRING 2009

A Model for Supported Independent Living

Message from Eva S. McCraven, President and Chief Executive Officer



Hillview Village, located steps from Hillview Mental Health Center, opened in 1994 as the first San Fernando Valley residential complex offering permanent housing to homeless people with mental illness and providing them ready access to mental health services on the same campus.

Housing and mental health professionals now agree that Hillview Village-type independent living raises wellness rates among homeless mentally ill adults and reduces the use of inpatient services, including detoxification and substance abuse treatment. We've long insisted that when mental health clients have stable homes, they are more able to accept treatment and more willing take responsibility for their recovery. Hillview is unique, however, in having our own clients in Section 8 housing on our own campus.

A friendly and safe community

Hillview Village is home to 49 rent-paying residents who live in studio and one-bedroom apartments. Residents run town hall meetings to address community-living concerns and plan social gatherings. They remind one another that security is everyone's responsibility. They publish their own monthly newsletter. The average condo owner would recognize these activities.

Unlike average condo owners, Village residents organize end-of-month group dinners when money runs low, remind one another to take medications and attend therapy sessions, and tell their case managers when they feel unwell. The resident manager, who is not a mental health professional, collects rent checks, maintains Section 8 compliance records, responds

to everyday emergencies such as lost keys and leaky faucets, meets regularly with case managers, and alerts our staff when residents show signs of instability.

Seems so easy now

That wasn't so in the early 1980s when we envisioned permanent housing at a mental health center. I remember attending a national conference in New York for mental health agencies and housing experts from the private sector and government to talk about combining housing and mental health funding sources. People mostly argued over whether mental health professionals had the business expertise to manage apartments without making too many concessions to their mentally ill residents.

Eventually the federal government became enlightened and began extending funds to counties to house clients in the mental health system.

Hillview had a vacant lot, bought at a bargain-basement price, for which we got high-density zoning approval. We discovered A Community of Friends, a Los Angeles consulting organization that has been developing housing for individuals and families with special needs since 1988. With their guidance and our considerable equity in the property, we got funding for the \$4.3 million project, our investors got tax credits, and Hillview Village got permanent status as Section 8 housing. All that in five years!

We even made our neighbors happy. Our attractive buildings would replace a trash-strewn weed patch and our 24-hour staffing promised to make the neighborhood more secure.

A rocky start

By its nature, Hillview Village was a tough place. We deliberately brought in higher-need clients because we could give them supportive services. These formerly homeless residents were dealing with mental illness and, for some, substance abuse. All were disabled. All were poor. Few grasped that they were living in their own apartments, not treatment centers, and were responsible for their own apartments and the Village community. Some stole everything that wasn't locked or nailed down. Others brought drug use and other illegal activities into the Village.

Still, we believed in the concept. To maintain stability, we moved the worst offenders and kept a close watch for illegal activity. For everyone else, we invested more time and attention. Case managers and therapists emphasized the responsibilities of independent living. The staff provided general mental health education and encouraged residents to use more services next door at the treatment center. Slowly, the residents got it. At town hall meetings they went from barraging me with demands to requesting help in organizing activities that would

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encourage cohesion. They began to look at the Village as their own community and their neighbors as individual people—not a group of mentally ill patients.

Wendell Gover became our resident manager 13 years ago. He understood that his job as a business manager included getting to know the residents and serving as a liaison to the clinical staff. Wendell retired this fall and we will miss our friend greatly.

The earliest residents also never rattled Sande Weiss, Hillview Director of Community and Public Relations and our liaison to the Village. She recalls stocking the community kitchen and dining room with microwave ovens and toasters and discovering that within a week each one had “walked out.” Sande is responsible for much of today’s cohesiveness in the Village. She knows everyone because she processes their applications, visits almost daily, organizes community events, and so much more.

Success to savor

We have learned to be good housing managers as well as supportive mental health clinicians. We also accept clients from other mental health agencies on the stipulation that they consent to regular wellness checks by our clinical staff and emergency care treatment, if necessary, and this has worked out very well.

When I talk about the Village, I like to tell my “Peggy Lee story.” I was facilitating a grief therapy session after a death in the Village. Residents talked about how wonderful they felt living in a supportive community. One man, a Village leader who also took an interest in mental health education, declared that he was ready to experience more of the world. He was ready to move on—much to our disappointment. Then I realized something: He was asking Peggy Lee’s question in the song, “Is That All There Is?” He eventually left. He overcame shaky times dealing with money management and attacks of nerves—he’s still our client—but he’s still on his own.

The success of Hillview Village answers the question that our residents ask about their futures: Yes. There is so much more.



Wendell Gover retired last fall after 13 years as Village Resident Manager.



Terri Lomas certainly knows the command for “Action!” Terri is a resident of Hillview Village, holder of a literacy certificate and eight proud years sober. She has worked as a peer counselor and has plans to earn her license as a drug and alcohol counselor. “Hillview saved my life,” she told an interviewer for the Kaiser Permanente Community Benefit Department. “Hillview gave me a life. If not for Hillview, I’d probably be living on the streets, in prison or dead.” Terri volunteered to tell her story in a video about mental health agencies that were assisted by Kaiser Permanente’s Community Service Grant. Hillview received a three-year grant for \$30,000 to be used primarily for mental health services for people who have no insurance. Terri came to Hillview via the Mentally Ill Offenders program and for years attended group therapy sessions on staying healthy and learning to be self-sufficient. “It clicked in my head that I could fill the hole in my heart by being clean and sober and helping people,” she said, “and not with drugs, alcohol, food and bad relationships.” As a former peer



advocate, Terri told her interviewer that she understood the challenges of Hillview clients struggling with recovery and was especially effective in helping them. She also led group sessions in relapse prevention, dual diagnosis, reading comprehension, and navigating back to school. Kaiser videographers also chronicled the success stories of Hillview Village residents and lobby greeters David Morey and Sybil Bonsante.

Hillview gave me a life. If not for Hillview, I'd probably be living on the streets, in prison or dead.

The Path to Recovery Goes through Hillview's Peer-Supported Wellness Center

At the Wellness Center, conversations among clients extend beyond topics of the day at the social and skill-building groups. That's because everyone in this Hillview Mental Health Center program is well on the way to recovery and has a lot on his or her mind.

A nutrition group member bemoaned the weight gain that came from her medication. This prompted insights about the emotional and caloric content of food, particularly from people who suffered bulimia and anorexia. In the reading group, five men convinced a sixth to consider the mothers, wives, sisters, and daughters in his life and to treat women with respect. They won grudging acknowledgement from the former pimp. When the arts and crafts group critiqued well-known paintings, talk turned to how the mental disorders of famous artists led them to see the world differently—often brilliantly.

"We encourage self-expression and camaraderie among people on the way to recovery to help them integrate into the larger community. There's always something more to each exercise," said Mary Leslie, who launched the Wellness Center last year. Gaston Nguyen, Ph.D., now leads the program.

The Wellness Center concept was developed under the auspices of the Los Angeles County Department of Mental Health and funded through the Mental Health Services Act. The stated goal is "promoting community integration, client empowerment, social, emotional, and physical well-being." The self-directed, peer-support program is for advanced clients who are preparing to exit the formal mental health system after years of psychotherapy, hospitalizations and addictions. They range from people who are still getting treatment but can manage their symptom distress to people who are self-supporting and no longer psychiatrically disabled.

Connecting with the outside community

Wellness Center advocates call the outward-focused program the wave of the future. For example, traditional mental health services on independent living focus on skills such as cooking, cleaning and budgeting; Wellness groups extend the concept to helping participants find housing and understand tenants rights.



Gaston Nguyen, Wellness Center Program Manager



Miguel Guzman, Peer Advocate



Henry Garcia, Peer Advocate

"It acknowledges that there can be recovery in mental illness, including stages of recovery," Ms. Leslie explained. "We want people to know there's a world beyond the mental health world, and they can have a seamless transition to it. People can live independently and still suffer some form of mental illness. That's empowering."

Group leader and peer advocate Miguel Guzman is testimony to that optimism. He works part-time at Hillview and attends college to become a certified alcohol and addiction counselor. He lives in a transitional home and is an active panelist in self-help rehabilitation groups. Mr. Guzman, who is bipolar, is sober after 30 years of alcohol and drug use and occasional homelessness. He came to Hillview over a year ago after a 90-day rehabilitation. "Hillview woke me to the fact that I am a person and gave me back my humanity," he said. "I know I belong in the community and can do anything if I really want to."

Wellness Center participants meet on the first floor of the Carl C. McCraven Treatment Center and can choose among a rich schedule of group meetings. Programs promote mental wellness with topics such as self-esteem and stress management, physical well being through the walking club and creative nutrition, and self-help skills improvement through employment 101, housekeeping and language exchange. Social groups include scrap-booking, music appreciation and current events. Classes change to meet the changing interests of the members. Inevitably, group members form friendships and supportive alliances that make their lives easier.

Support groups for success

Mr. Guzman tells group members that their desire for wellness is a huge factor in

recovery. So is a social network. He encourages people to connect with one another, be supportive and celebrate everyone's accomplishments. He is especially effective in helping people to find "ah-ha!" moments of self-discovery that propel them further into recovery. "I'm 50 years old and, to me, everything is new. I'm learning to distinguish my feelings and put names to them. I know I'm not angry when I'm sad. I understand the changes that I need in my behavior and attitudes. I know how to concentrate on the positive," he said.

The Wellness Center actively encourages people graduating from other Hillview services to join in any activities that interest them and asks for their ideas and assistance in adding new classes and activities. Program leaders are always on the alert for people with skills and talent to share with their members. Peer advocates Miguel Guzman and Henry Garcia and others who have worked part-time in the Center enjoy their new roles as they learn to work with Hillview staff. Staff members, for their part, gain new insights into what the Wellness Center really means to clients.

"We've had a quite a few successes under Mary's leadership," said Dr. Nguyen. "Of course we're all looking forward to more because part of the success of the Wellness Center is learning and adapting. That's why we constantly encourage Wellness Center members to give us ideas and feedback about new classes, activities and the overall program. We believe that is a successful collaboration."

To learn more about the Wellness Center, please call 818-896-1161, ext. 271.

Cultural Sensitivity and Client Care Begins at the Front Desk

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Hillview Mental Health Center, Inc., is a non-profit corporation that serves as a Gateway to Recovery, Independence and Health for nearly 2,000 East San Fernando Valley residents each year.

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For clients of Hillview Mental Health Center, each visit begins at the lobby front desk where they receive a welcoming greeting in English or Spanish or any of 12 other languages. The receptionists' warmth and competence sets a positive tone for clients' continuing experiences with professionals, case managers and therapists. They help reduce stress and confusion for new clients. "At Hillview, we emphasize cultural sensitivity for our ethnically and racially diverse population, linguistic competence, courtesy, and respect for client privacy. I'm proud to say that those attributes begin

at our front desk. Our clients are always made to feel welcome and valued," said Dr. Eva McCraven, president and CEO. Front desk staff members also have important organizational abilities. They schedule appointments (and reschedule missed appointments) so mental health professionals make the most of each day, review initial paperwork, properly maintain charts and prescriptions, update records, and more—all while meeting the immediate needs of everyone in the waiting area. Noted Dr. McCraven: "Everyone at Hillview plays a part in client wellness in his or her own way."



Aide Herrera



Christi Farmer



Martina Martinez



Shaunee Turner

The mission of Hillview Mental Health Center, Inc. is to assist in empowering individuals and families affected by mental illness to assess their needs, strengths and goals, and work collaboratively with mental health professionals and other staff to plan services that are person-centered, culturally competent and effective in promoting recovery and the ability to live as fully participating members of the community.



HILLVIEW
Mental Health Center, INC.

A non-profit corporation serving the East San Fernando Valley since 1966

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