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Housing for mentally ill in SLO is positive step

By James Statler

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Transitions Mental Health Association plans to build up to 35 studio apartments for its clients at Sunny Acres, the building perched on the hilltop above Johnson Avenue in San Luis Obispo.

DAVID MIDDLECAMP — dmiddlecamp@thetribunenews.com [Buy Photo](#)

From one vantage, it might seem irresponsible and threatening to bring mid-density housing for those with mental illness to any neighborhood in our community, especially if one is unfamiliar with folks living with mental illness.

Still, the notion that violence and safety issues will increase in surrounding neighborhoods as a result of [Sunny Acres supportive housing](#) is specious and unfounded. Current research points to an opposite and much more positive effect with housing aid. [UC Berkeley's Goldman School of Public Policy](#) examined the consequences of providing supportive housing for 250 people with mental illness and found a 58 percent decrease in emergency room visits, a corresponding drop in hospital stays and virtual elimination of their

use of residential mental health facilities.

A clearer picture of San Luis Obispo County’s public mental health system is also needed. County Mental Health operates inpatient and outpatient clinic units adjacent to Sunny Acres. This means **Transitions-Mental Health Association’s** (TMHA) Sunny Acres project will hardly bring a rash of never-before-seen clients to the Johnson Avenue area neighborhoods, but will, in fact, be a protective insulator for a population that is already utilizing high-level treatment services through the county in that very neighborhood .

The notion that the project is fiscally irresponsible also deflates when considering that supportive and affordable housing is lamentably scarce for the chronically mentally ill and any current community needs assessment would confirm that conclusion. The state relies heavily on the criminal justice system to house the mentally ill, which is vastly more costly than fostering community-based housing programs that are backed by favorable property arrangements that sustain nonprofits like TMHA.

In moving forward, I hope this discussion finds guidance and direction through current research, best practices and analysis of community needs in our area. I have confidence that TMHA is welcoming community dialogue, walking the path of best practices and continuing to show leadership in mental health services locally.

James Statler is executive director of the Community Counseling Center.

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