

S.F. to subsidize 500 housing units for people leaving Laguna Honda

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Advocates for elders and people with disabilities are applauding San Francisco officials for settling a civil rights class-action suit by agreeing to subsidize 500 housing units for patients discharged from Laguna Honda Hospital and Rehabilitation Center.

The innovative settlement, calling for accessible community housing over the next five years, is still preliminary and must be approved by the San Francisco Health Commission, the Board of Supervisors and the federal district court.

The housing is designed for people who have been hospitalized but could live independently with a little help.

"The reason we are settling is because there isn't a lot of disagreement," said Marc Slavin, director of government and community relations for Laguna Honda. "Independent living is part of our mission. This agreement will accelerate our goal to maximize independence. It will be a model for other jurisdictions."

Currently, it costs San Francisco \$55,000 annually to house each resident at Laguna Honda, said Dr. Mitch Katz, director of the San Francisco Department of Public Health.

The residents, primarily elders and people with disabilities, are generally eligible for as much as \$77,000 in state and federally funded services. But because they are housed in an institution, they haven't been able to tap into those services. They will once they're living in the community.

Under the preliminary settlement, which creates a new program called "Success at Home," the city would pay on average \$1,000 per residential unit. The residents would contribute a third of their monthly Social Security payments toward the rent.

"It's very exciting - we're filling a huge hole," Katz said. "It's a win for the client and a savings for the city, so it's a win-win."

Elissa Gershon, lead attorney from the Oakland office of Protection & Advocacy Inc., which filed the suit, said city staff will work with landlords in the private market to create and lease housing units. The apartments will be available to people who live at Laguna Honda or are at risk of being admitted.

"I'm not aware of any other city doing this," she said. "San Francisco has really partnered with us in coming up with creative solutions to a long-standing problem. The idea is to live in a safe, accessible neighborhood - as independently as possible."

Located on Twin Peaks, the 62-acre, 140-year-old Laguna Honda is home to about 1,000 people. The average long-term resident's stay is five years.

"A lot of communities are struggling with how to make long-term services more accessible," said Anne Hinton, director of the San Francisco Department of Aging and Adult Services, which will jointly manage the new program with the Department of Public Health. "This has been a long time coming for San Francisco, and it's really exciting."

Mark Chambers, 48, who was first admitted to Laguna Honda in 1999 after suffering a traumatic brain injury, was one of a half-dozen plaintiffs to file suit. He said Tuesday that he hopes to be among the first to move into his new home. "I'm excited to have a chance to live in the community, and that other people will have that chance too," he said.

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