



HOUSING AND HEALTH  
TO END HOMELESSNESS

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## DESC Burien Supportive Housing FAQs

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March 30, 2021

Thank you to all our neighbors and Burien community members who attended DESC Burien's Virtual Public Meeting on the evening of Tuesday, February 23, 2021! We also appreciate those who reached out via the comment form on our website and those who called or emailed to ask questions, give feedback, and express support. We received a lot of questions and were unable to get to every one of them. This document is intended to capture the scope of questions we received and provide responses to concerned members of the community.

On March 10, 2021, DESC presented to the Planning Commission of Burien which unanimously voted to advance DESC's Affordable Housing Demonstration Program application to the Burien City Council. The Burien City Council will hear DESC present about this project on Monday, April 5, 2021 at 7:00 p.m. This document has been updated to reflect questions asked by the members of the Planning Commission.

On March 23, 2021, DESC, in concert with Discover Burien and the Seattle Southside Chamber of Commerce, invited small business owners to attend a virtual meeting where DESC leadership presented DESC and the DESC Burien site. This document has been updated to reflect questions asked by attendees of this meeting.

### **DESC - The Organization**

#### **What is DESC?**

For 42 years, DESC has provided a multitude of services that provide health and housing to vulnerable people experiencing homelessness including behavioral health services, crisis intervention, outreach, over 500 shelter beds and survival services, and over 1200 supportive housing units across multiple neighborhoods in Seattle. DESC's supportive housing has been the subject of numerous research evaluations and has won numerous awards.

DESC is a 501c3 nonprofit organization funded by a mixture of public contracts, health insurance (Medicaid), tenant rents and rent subsidies, and private donations.

### **Site/Location**

#### **Why did DESC choose the City of Burien for this project?**

DESC is focused on homelessness in King County and provides behavioral health crisis services countywide. We want to establish services where the needs are and have observed the growing level of homelessness outside Seattle for a number of years. In Burien we see a community with

Updated March 30, 2021

unmet needs among the population group DESC serves, and a community with a stated intent to address affordable housing needs. We seek sites that are appropriate to our program and building needs. This means looking for properties in places where people live and where zoning supports the sort of multi-unit properties we create. The site at 801 SW 150<sup>th</sup> St is suited to our tenants as it is near a transit hub and features easy access to groceries and other amenities. DESC entered into a purchase and sale agreement in the summer of 2020 and intends to close on the property in August of 2021.

Furthermore, with the City of Burien's Affordable Housing Demonstration Program (which DESC applied for in Fall of 2020), we know we are joining a community of shared values, one that supports equity and housing.

### **Construction and Design**

#### **What is the proposed design of the DESC Burien supportive housing project?**

DESC Burien will feature 95 studio units for single adults with a service space dedicated to tenant supports on the first floor. Amenities include a commercial kitchen, a medical office, a street-facing front desk with 24/7 staffing, offices for case managers, and an alley-facing exterior courtyard that may only be accessed by tenants. We plan to provide three onsite parking spaces for DESC use. Our tenants do not typically own vehicles, thus we do not expect to need more parking for this purpose. This building will include solar panels and electronic utility monitoring systems which allow maintenance staff to intervene in real-time if a leak occurs in the building or water is running excessively. We also have a landscaping plan that will add trees and green space to the areas along SW 150<sup>th</sup> St and 8<sup>th</sup> Ave

We intend to fund the building through Low Income Housing Tax Credits, county, and state funding. DESC Burien will begin construction in early 2022 and welcome its first tenants in spring of 2023.

### **Demographics/Population/Residents**

#### **How will DESC Burien recruit and select applicants?**

DESC intends to work with local organizations to target and outreach individuals already experiencing homelessness in Burien. These individuals will apply for DESC Burien units through the County's Coordinated Entry for All program. DESC Burien will house single adults experiencing chronic homelessness, which means people homeless for one year or longer and living with a disability. Tenants will have incomes less than 30% of the area median income. At least 25 units will be reserved for veterans experiencing chronic homelessness. Since supportive housing is a specialized resource with built-in robust supports, DESC selects applicants who need this type of housing to be successful.

King County has affirmed that new supportive housing programs should be established to meet the needs of people already in a given community.

### **Property/Service Management/Operations**

#### **What is permanent supportive housing?**

Permanent supportive housing is a model that brings support services to tenants help them live successfully in their apartments. Each tenant signs a lease - their housing is permanent, and they may stay as long as they wish, provided they abide by the terms of the lease. Tenants pay 30% of their income as rent. DESC's operating costs are supported by these tenant rents and other sources likely including a rent subsidy supplied by King County Housing Authority vouchers. DESC Burien tenants will have the typical rights and responsibilities of traditional housing with the added support of onsite case management, onsite property management, and 24/7 staffing.

Onsite case managers assist tenants to connect with behavioral health providers, attend medical appointments, keep units clean and in good condition, obtain metro passes, pay rent on time, and manage their medication. Other provided support includes some meals as well as onsite activities, therapeutic groups, and crisis management services.

### **What will staffing be like at DESC Burien?**

DESC Burien will have an onsite manager, five housing case managers, and ten residential counselors who will staff the front desk and milieu spaces over three shifts. Staff presence is highest during daytime hours, but evening, overnight, and weekend times will have, at minimum, two staff members onsite.

All DESC staff receive training across a variety of topics including effective engagement skills with clients and crisis intervention. This training teaches staff how to identify a person in crisis as well as a range of de-escalation skills, to prevent situations from becoming more acute and avoid the unnecessary reliance on external sources such as police services. One of the most helpful elements of de-escalation is an existing trusting relationship with a tenant. Everything staff do is for the purpose of furthering trusting engagement with clients.

### **Quality of Living/Effects on the Neighborhood/Neighborhood Responsibility**

#### **Will neighbors see an increase in drug activity in the community?**

Some DESC clients struggle with substance use issues. We work with people connect to supports or treatment at their own pace. We don't tolerate drug dealing in our properties and we have a code of conduct for our tenants that prohibits drug-related and other problematic behaviors in the surrounding community. The DESC Burien building will have sharps disposal bins in multiple common areas such as the client restrooms, laundry rooms, and trash rooms. Housing case managers will work closely with tenants to ensure they have the resources needed to dispose of any sharps safely and appropriately.

#### **Will DESC Burien's presence in the neighborhood increase emergency response calls?**

DESC's tenants live with complex conditions that sometimes result in personal crises, especially medical emergencies. We attempt to minimize these events by being attentive that what is going on with our tenants and bringing services to them. Given the disability profiles of our tenants, it's true that 911 calls are more likely in our building than an average apartment building. Examples of what might happen include a DESC tenant calling 911 to report an issue that either isn't real or isn't an emergency. Partnerships with police and fire allow us to ensure we keep these calls down. Studies on DESC and other supportive housing programs have shown that crisis events and 911 calls decrease once people go into supportive housing compared to when those people were on the streets, so the overall burden on crisis response systems in Burien will go down.

**What is DESC Burien’s plan for tenants behaving inappropriately in the neighborhood, including interfering with or loitering around local businesses?**

When tenants move in, they sign an addendum to the lease called the Good Neighbor policy. This policy prohibits problematic behaviors such as a loitering around local businesses. Should a business suspect that an individual exhibiting concerning behavior lives at the DESC Burien building, they may call the front desk at any time day or night for a response. DESC’s stance is to check on the situation as quickly as possible, and to reinforce expectations if the person is a DESC tenant. In the event the person does not reside in the DESC Burien building, we would do our best to help resolve the matter.

**What is DESC’s process for integrating neighborhood feedback into their plans?**

DESC welcomes feedback from neighbors and wants to understand any questions and concerns, including what additional needs the neighborhood has. Recommendations about building design features may be possible to consider, and ideas about the most productive communication channels for DESC’s staff once the building is operational are most welcome. If there is a neighborhood need that might be addressed in DESC’s building, we would like to hear it and see if we can help. An example that comes to mind is neighborhood meeting spaces for community groups, which may be something DESC’s building design could accommodate.

**Will property crimes increase as a result of your tenants or visitors of your tenants?**

We have no experience showing that DESC’s tenants or their visitors engage in crimes that affect the neighbors of our buildings, including businesses, residents, and children. As noted above, we have systems in place to address any inappropriate behaviors by DESC tenants in the neighborhood. Research has shown repeatedly that when people experiencing homelessness gain the stability of a home, incidents of arrests and incarceration decline significantly and steadily. For any tenants going through periods of struggle, DESC staff are in a position to much more closely monitor behaviors and intervene as needed than if the same person were living homeless in the area.

**How will DESC help integrate tenants into the surrounding neighborhood?**

DESC’s tenants will all be permanent residents of the community. Many of them will eagerly avail themselves of the range of groups and activities in the neighborhood, while others will more likely keep to themselves. DESC is excited to help facilitate connection between tenants of our building and other neighbors by establishing low-key social events for people to meet one another, via neighborhood cleanup projects, and other similar activities.

**Can we expect more people experiencing homelessness to be living in cars or motorhomes near the building?**

The DESC building will not have services for people other than those who live in the building, so there would be no advantage to parking a vehicle near the building.

**Questions Received From the Burien City Council**

**During the public meeting, DESC said they would prioritize Burien residents that need the assistance. Is this written somewhere? Is there a contract that states this?**

King County officials have stated publicly that they intend for new supportive housing projects to serve the needs of the local area. We will work with our King County contacts to confirm whether this is documented somewhere in their policies.

**Would the residents pay rent, or is it 100% covered by subsidies? If covered by subsidies, would that not qualify for the project as “affordable housing” but public housing?**

Tenants will pay rent based on their individual income. DESC will utilize additional resources to cover the full array of operating costs not covered by the low rents paid by the tenants. A likely revenue source would be rent subsidies attached to the apartments. A number of affordable housing projects are subsidized in this way. The term “public housing” refers to another kind of subsidized housing project that is operated by a public housing authority such as KCHA.

**What is DESC’s process of connecting residents for long-term housing for its residents?**

Permanent supportive housing is considered long-term housing. Not everyone stays forever, but the typical tenant stays for many years until another type of environment is needed such as assisted living or skilled nursing. Some people move out to other housing along the way because they desire something else and are able to be successful there. In such cases, DESC staff assist tenants with making these other arrangements.

**What was the timing of DESC’s planning and decision-making regarding properties in Burien?** DESC initially became interested in Burien when learning in late 2019 about the Affordable Housing Demonstration Program legislation. We became aware that St. Vincent de Paul was potentially interested in redeveloping their property in Burien, so in early 2020 we began talking with them about how a partnership could work. Toward the middle of the year we realized that we weren’t going to be able to successfully redevelop the St. Vincent site for the needs of both organizations. At that time, we engaged a real estate broker and began looking for other properties in Burien so we could use the Affordable Housing Demonstration Program.

**Are other properties in Burien being considered or were other properties under considered?**

We selected the site on 150th because of several characteristics including great access to transit, which our tenants need. Although we wish this site had more of a residential context, we did note that some condo buildings were being constructed or had permits pending and we envisioned a more residential downtown urban setting in the future. Many other sites that we evaluated had a more residential context, such as near schools, homes and small businesses, but had very poor access to transit. In the end, we selected this property as the one with the best combination of characteristics for our needs.

### **Questions Received From the Planning Commission**

**Are the services offered mandatory?**

DESC uses a voluntary model of services. Evidence shows that coercing participation in services is not as effective as devising services and engagement strategies that are attractive to tenants. This results in a very high service participation rates.

**Does DESC have plans to provide a food bank?**

DESC continues to use our resources to build on what we do best: providing health and housing to King County’s most vulnerable residents experiencing homelessness. While we do a lot of work helping our tenants acquire food for themselves, we do not have plans at this time to expand our

services to provide a food bank for the broader community. DESC would be happy to explore ways we could partner with organizations beginning this endeavor.

**You have indicated your commitment to housing people experiencing homelessness in Burien. What local organizations have you reached out to that may help you achieve this?**

DESC has reached out to various behavioral healthcare and social services organizations doing work in Burien including Navos, Sound Health, Catholic Community Services, the LEAD program, REACH, and Mary's Place. We have strong relationships with many of these organizations. We have been in communication with Chief Boe and expect that his team will be helpful in identifying individuals we may outreach for housing. As we get closer to opening in 2023, we will continue to make connections with local agencies that can help us fill our building with those who are unhoused in Burien.

**What does DESC do to dispel myths about homelessness and educate communities about the work you do?**

DESC sent invitations to its February Virtual Public Meeting to addresses within 1000 feet of the DESC Burien site. We invited many local organizations and stakeholders to attend as well. Approximately 140 people attended the meeting. We continue to provide updates through our website and respond to people who submit questions or concerns. The materials we have shared with neighbors are translated into Spanish and can be found on the website. We also have several meetings and tours scheduled with members of the business community in Burien.

**How is this project different from an Enhanced Services Facility (ESF)?**

DESC Burien Supportive Housing is very different. It is voluntary and it is rental housing with services that act as disability accommodations. Enhanced Service Facilities deploy a more institutional service model with personal care assistance and nursing services onsite. People who live at ESFs are often mandated to live there by the court system. DESC has no custodial control over individuals in its housing. All DESC Burien tenants will have the rights and responsibilities of a typical Washington State tenant.

**Will DESC Burien Supportive Housing source labor from the local area for construction?**

DESC would be pleased to source labor from the Burien area. Sometimes our public funding contracts have compliance requirements for subcontractors that can make the process more arduous, however, DESC intends to strategize with our general contractor between now and when bids go out to develop area contacts and find ways to make those reporting requirements more accessible to local businesses.

**Will DESC track data on how successful it is in housing individuals from Burien?**

Yes. DESC has a robust data system that tracks people we serve. We will ensure we track updated information about where people were experiencing homelessness in order to quantify our local positive impact as we open DESC Burien.

**Will DESC prioritize people of color?**

BIPOC (Black, indigenous, and people of color) are overrepresented in the population of people experiencing homelessness. As a result, we expect that DESC Burien will house high numbers of BIPOC individuals. While many of our prioritization requirements (such as our set-aside veteran units) come from public funding sources, DESC may consider folding other prioritizations into its recruitment.

**If DESC has applicants with 30-50% AMI (area median income), do they get put on a waiting list?**

Due to the scarcity of affordable housing and the extremely low income population we serve, it is not difficult to fill the units we rent. Furthermore, our funding sources constrain us to rent to individuals with 30% or lower AMI. The people DESC Burien is intended to serve - individuals experiencing long-term homelessness who also have disabilities - often make 0-15% of the median income.

**Will DESC be building sidewalks?**

Yes! DESC Burien will be significantly improving the site as well as adding sidewalks along both sides of the corner lot.

**Is it hard to fill veteran units due to the 30% AMI restriction?**

Unfortunately, there is no shortage of veterans under 30% experiencing long term homelessness. We do not have difficulty filling units.

**What's the average time tenants stay with DESC?**

For the vast majority of people, their DESC apartment is a permanent home until they pass away or need a higher level of care. The high cost of market rate housing and income levels of our tenant population make it unlikely they will move into an independent market rate housing situation.

**Have you worked with King County Metro around the renovations for the H Line that will occur in front of DESC Burien along 150<sup>th</sup> Street?**

The DESC Burien design team has reached out to King County Metro and obtained plans for their work along 150<sup>th</sup>. Our goal is to work with their schedule as closely as possible so we can avoid a situation where DESC has to remove brand-new work done by King County and vice versa. We are excited that the H Line will be so convenient and walkable for our tenants!

**Questions Received from Businesses During March 23<sup>rd</sup> Meeting**

**Has DESC done any outreach to the Latino businesses around the site?**

DESC mailed flyers and letters to properties within 1000 feet of the proposed site, and followed up with efforts to reach out to our Spanish-speaking neighbors by making translated materials available on our website and supplying these materials to the Greater Church Council of Seattle which has works closely within Latinx communities in Burien.

**What are the next steps in this process with the City Council?**

The reason this project is going before the City Council is because it is seeking to become a part of the Affordable Housing Demonstration Program. This program will allow us to work with the City to attain several zoning exceptions which will assist us in constructing a building which accommodates our population and maintains a balanced development budget. DESC was recently unanimously recommended for the Program by the Planning Committee. On April 5th, DESC Burien will be presented the City Council for consideration of acceptance into the program. City Council approval is the final step in the Affordable Housing Demonstration Program application process.

**If the City Council doesn't approve the Affordable Housing Demonstration, would the project still go forward?**

Yes, DESC will work to make the site location and existing zoning requirements work for its building.

**Is there any City of Burien funding going into the program?**

No, and we do not expect to receive any.

**With a name like the Downtown Emergency Service Center, should neighbors expect that more people experiencing homelessness will arrive in the area expecting emergency services?**

Currently, “DESC Burien” is a placeholder we are using to distinguish this project. Further along in the development process, DESC will choose a name that will go on the sign. Like many of our other buildings (Rainier House, Evans House, Hobson Place among them), we intend that “DESC” will not be a part of the name. We are open to any suggestions for naming conventions that neighbors might have! The origin of DESC’s full name comes from when DESC was created to operate an emergency shelter in downtown Seattle. The permanent housing proposed for Burien is not an emergency shelter.

**Where are the similar facilities in King County?**

You may see other similar DESC facilities on our Supportive Housing webpage:  
<https://www.desc.org/what-we-do/housing/>

**Are there compliance guidelines from funders that DESC Burien will follow?**

DESC Burien will be funded by capital public sources such as the Washington State Department of Commerce Housing Trust Fund, the King County Housing Finance Program, and the Low Income Housing Tax Credit program. We will also be receiving King County operating support and support services funding as well as 95 King County Housing Authority vouchers for this project. In working with these public funders, DESC Burien will be required to commit to making the building affordable for 50 years, submitting tenant eligibility paperwork each year, and undergoing annual unit inspections, to name a few.

**Any additional funding in case if there’s an increase for police or emergency services which would become a burden for Burien?**

We do not know of availability of funds of this type. However, DESC hopes to reduce the need for emergency services by simply being in the neighborhood. Individuals who are housed are less likely to utilize emergency services and less likely to create disturbances that necessitate 911 calls.

**If someone has a history of violence, would they be vetted in or out of the system?**

DESC does not exclude individuals with criminal backgrounds from its housing programs. We find that people with long histories of homelessness may have criminal records that reflect the difficulties of life lived on the street. In many cases, past violent behavior stems from lack of connection to behavioral health resources. That said, our tenants are some of the most vulnerable individuals in the community which makes them much more likely to be a victim of violence than a perpetrator. The lease that tenants sign upon move-in clearly identifies violence as cause for lease termination.

**What is your pet policy with the tenants?**

DESC does not allow pets but allows service and emotional support animals.

**Are couples or married couples allowed to cohabitate?**



Our studios are single occupancy studio apartments only.

**How many businesses on that property now?**

Currently there are 12 leases, 10 of which will expire by the time DESC will begin construction. DESC has engaged relocation consultant Kerry Lynch who has years of experience providing relocation assistance to businesses. DESC Burien carries a budget for relocation assistance and intends to do all we can to assist all 12 businesses in finding comparable locations and making smooth transitions.

**How has DESC's supportive housing program evolved over the years?**

There's more of it. This model was very new in the 1990s when DESC opened its first couple housing projects. "Housing readiness" was a prevailing idea at the time which required that people experiencing homelessness meet certain expectations such as sobriety or employment in order to obtain housing. Over time, providing someone with housing and a safe and stable place to live regardless of their life circumstances became more accepted. Along the way, we engaged with external researchers to evaluate the approach and identify the elements that make it successful. Increasingly, other institutions and sectors have come to see housing as fundamental to having good health.

**What is the eviction rate for DESC properties?**

It is very low. In 2020, DESC asked 14 people to terminate their leases out of more than 1200 served. Of those 14, DESC rehoused or resheltered all but two. DESC supportive housing really provides permanent homes for most people and eviction is very rare.

**Was transportation a factor in selecting the site location? How often DESC tenants use public transportation?**

DESC residents do not typically own vehicles, so finding a walkable location with nearby public transportation was very important when DESC's Property Development Team evaluated site locations. DESC tenants use public transportation very frequently. That and walking is often the only way tenants have to get around.

**Will this location have a Safe Injection Site?**

No, DESC Burien will not run a Safe Injection Site. This will be a housing development only.

**What is DESC's approach to substance use treatment?**

Drug use is not simply permitted in our programs. However, many DESC clients are living with substance use challenges and many struggle with this. We take an open and honest approach with our tenants about this topic. Much like substance use in the broader community, many addictions play out in private and we work to connect people to treatment. Some people have substance use issues that can impact the broader community, which leads us to treating those behaviors as lease enforcement issues.

Throughout all our work with people living with substance use issues, we use an approach called harm reduction. This is a practical approach that acknowledges risky behavior, like drug use, exists in our world. Instead of demanding risky behavior simply cease (often with little effect), harm reduction attempts to reduce the dangers associated with the risky behavior. This can take many forms, but most well-known are provision of clean needles and access to condoms.

A common societal belief exists that the only path to recovery from substance use is immediate and total abstinence and/or a tough love approach. While this approach works for some people, others have not been successful and have worsening outcomes over time. This means that other approaches are required if we hope to meet the treatment needs in our community.

DESC has partnered with the University of Washington on several studies and we have not seen any support for the idea that our harm reduction approach leads to increase substance use or a worsening of substance use outcomes. In study after study we have found the opposite: harm reduction is associated with reduced drug use, reduced harm and - at the community level - reduced need for publicly funded services.

**What is a typical DESC building's vacancy rate?**

Turnover in DESC buildings is extremely low. It varies between 2-5% annually. Most people who move in to DESC housing make it their life-long home.

**Will DESC tenants seek employment in the community?**

Very few residents seek employment. Most tenants have disabilities that preclude them from getting and keeping a job. However, some are able to obtain work. Many of these individuals are part of DESC's Supported Employment Program and are assisted by a case manager who assists them in providing coaching and job skills.

**How has housing changed for your tenants during the pandemic?**

Many of our tenants are at high risk for infection. We have worked hard to encourage our tenants to socially distance and wear masks while also maintaining safe and conscientious engagement. Staff have changed a number of procedures to limit tenant interaction including making door-to-door medication and meal deliveries, removing lounge furniture downstairs to limit group gatherings, and asking tenants not to have visitors.

This has been a difficult time for our clients and many are feeling isolated. We have had generous organizations and individuals donate art projects, activity kits, books, and games, but tenants have missed group activities and socialization considerably.

**Will DESC Burien have its own vehicles for tenant transportation?**

DESC Burien will have at least two vehicles onsite for client transportation. Staff frequently assist tenants in taking them shopping or to medical appointments and when it is not feasible to do so using public transportation, staff have the option to use the onsite vehicles.