



HOUSING AND HEALTH
TO END HOMELESSNESS

515 Third Avenue
Seattle, WA 98104
phone: 206.464.1570
fax: 206.624.4196

desc.org

DESC Woodland Supportive Housing FAQs

September 16, 2021

Site Address: 4905 Aurora Ave N., Seattle, WA 98103

Thank you to all our neighbors and community members who contributed questions to this FAQ. This document is intended to answer the questions we have received throughout the neighborhood notification process.

DESC – The Organization

What is DESC?

DESC's vision is a community where no person is abandoned, ignored, or experiencing homelessness. We help people with the complex needs of homelessness, substance use disorders, and serious mental illness achieve their highest potential for health and well-being through comprehensive services, treatment, and housing.

We've done this work for 42 years. Our supportive housing has been the subject of numerous research evaluations and has won several awards. Along with more than 1,400 units of supportive housing, we also provide shelter to nearly 500 people. We are a state-licensed mental health and substance use disorder treatment provider and integrate those and other healthcare services into all of our programs. 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 N 50th and Aurora site for this project?

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 4905 Aurora Ave N is suited to our tenants as it is near a transit corridor and is accessible to green space and hubs for groceries and amenities. DESC entered into a purchase and sale agreement in the spring of 2021 and has just closed on the acquisition. Furthermore, the site purchase included a Master Use Permit which can be re-issued to meet DESC Woodland's needs. The work that has already been done on the Master Use Permit assists us in meeting our proposed timeline.

Construction and Design

September 16, 2021

Where is DESC Woodland in the process of design and construction?

Land acquisition was just completed, followed by completion of the schematic design of the project by SMR Architects. Through a competitive process, we have awarded the construction contract to Absher Construction Company. Absher is providing preconstruction services as well as serving as the general contractor for the building once construction begins.

Find more information in the section Project Funding, below.

What is the proposed design of the DESC Woodland supportive housing project?

DESC Woodland will feature 100 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, an Aurora-facing entrance with 24/7 staffing, offices for case managers, and an interior courtyard that may only be accessed by tenants. We plan to provide a small onsite parking garage with 7 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 heat pump hot water 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 will also have a landscaping plan that will add trees and green space to the site.

Will there be community space for the neighborhood?

DESC is open to designing a community room on the first floor of the DESC Woodland project. Several other DESC housing projects have community rooms. Most notable is the community room used at Rainier House, located between Hillman City and Columbia City, which is utilized by several local groups at no charge. DESC Woodland has a conference room designed into the floor plan off of Aurora Avenue which could easily be used after hours and on weekends as a community meeting space.

Who will manage and provide security to the site during construction?

Absher Construction Company will serve as DESC Woodland's general contractor. They will provide fencing and site security during the construction period. Absher will distribute monthly newsletters to the community with updates on construction activities. Absher has assigned a site superintendent to our project who has over 20 years of construction and site management experience. While Absher's superintendent will be the primary contact, we also encourage neighbors to contact DESC if there are concerns during construction.

How is the affordable housing permitting process different than the market rate housing permitting process?

The City of Seattle is invested in increasing the amount of affordable housing available in Seattle. They have enacted several guidelines that expedite permitting for affordable housing projects. These projects are granted "Priority 2" status at the Seattle Department of Construction and Inspections. This means that affordable housing permitting documents are likely to be reviewed more quickly. The Seattle City Council passed emergency ordinance [CB 119769](#) during the COVID-19 pandemic which minimized Design Review requirements, many of which have traditionally required in-person outreach.

Project Funding

What funding sources will be utilized to fund construction and ongoing services offered at DESC Woodland?

In Fall 2021, DESC will be submitting capital funding applications to the Seattle Office of Housing, the Washington State Department of Commerce Housing Trust Fund, and the Washington State Housing Finance Commission. If we are awarded funds as well as the Low-Income Housing Tax Credits needed to fund this site, DESC Woodland will continue its initial timeline of closing on permanent financing and beginning construction in May 2022.

DESC relies on public operations and services funding to provide permanent supportive housing services, staffing, and operations support. This support may come in the form of HUD McKinney Continuum of Care subsidies, Seattle Housing Authority Section 8 vouchers, as well as operations and services funding available through the City of Seattle, King County, and the State of Washington.

Are there compliance guidelines from funders that DESC Woodland will follow?

In working with the public funders referenced in the question above, DESC will be required to make the building affordable for 50 years, submit tenant eligibility paperwork each year, and undergo annual unit inspections, among other requirements.

Demographics/Population/Residents

How will DESC Woodland recruit and select applicants?

DESC works with King County's Coordinated Entry for All program to identify for tenancy single adults experiencing chronic homelessness (which means people who have experienced homelessness for one year or longer) and living with a disability. Tenants will have incomes less than 30% of the area median income. Since supportive housing is a specialized resource with built-in robust supports, DESC selects applicants who need this type of housing to be successful. As much as possible, DESC wants this housing to be available to people already residing in the surrounding neighborhoods. To facilitate that, DESC can conduct outreach to people experiencing homelessness nearby, and will be in contact with other service providers to ensure that local individuals are enrolled in the Coordinated Entry system.

Will DESC Woodland provide permanent, long-term housing?

Permanent supportive housing is long-term housing. Not everyone stays forever, but the typical tenant stays for many years until another type of environment is needed, most often 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.

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. Individuals in the small portion of DESC's tenant population with past histories of violent incidents are able to live successfully in supportive housing, which in turn creates more opportunity for better connection to behavioral health care and further stabilization and social success.

Overall, our tenants are some of the most vulnerable individuals in the community. A person who is homeless is no more likely to be a criminal than a housed person, with one legal exception: [camping ordinances](#). A person experiencing homelessness is [less likely to perpetrate a violent crime than a](#)

[housed person](#), and is in fact more likely to be the victim of a violent crime than someone with safe housing.

How will our children be safe from sex offenders and other violent behavior?

DESC's clients have extremely low rates of incidents of violence against children. We have not had incidents in which a child in the neighborhood was harmed by a DESC tenant.

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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. The current average length of tenancy of a DESC supportive housing tenant is just under six years, which would be higher but for the inclusion in the average of buildings that have only opened in the past several years.

Will DESC tenants seek employment in the community?

A small portion of tenants are likely to 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 provides coaching and job skills.

Property/Service Management/Operations

What is permanent supportive housing?

Permanent supportive housing is a type of rental housing 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 public funding sources. DESC Woodland 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 provide wrap-around services, helping tenants to connect with behavioral health providers, attend medical appointments, keep units clean and in good condition, obtain transit passes, pay rent on time, and manage their medication. Other provided support includes meals, onsite activities, therapeutic groups, and crisis management.

What will staffing be like at DESC Woodland?

DESC Woodland will have an onsite manager, a project coordinator, six housing case managers, one housing stabilization specialist, and eleven residential counselors who will staff the front desk and milieu spaces over three shifts. Additionally, DESC Woodland will employ at least two janitorial staff. Building upkeep and repairs will be done by DESC's centralized Facilities Team. 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 and crisis intervention. This training teaches staff how to identify a person in crisis and how to use a range of de-escalation techniques that 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.

What are your staff turnover rates?

DESC's staff turnover rate is on pace to be about 34% this year. Turnover rates often depend on the type of position. For instance, we often see a higher turnover rate on entry level positions because DESC works hard to promote from within.

How would a concerned neighbor reach staff at DESC Woodland?

DESC Woodland's phone number will be published on DESC's website and will show up on Google as soon as it opens. We encourage neighbors to call our buildings directly. DESC Woodland's reception desk will be staffed 24/7 so neighbors should be able to reach a person on the phone at any time of the day. DESC staff will attempt to address issues as quickly as possible. If an issue requires additional follow-up, the Project Manager of the building will be reachable during business hours and will be a main point of contact for neighbors.

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 very high service participation rates.

Does DESC partner with local service providers?

We have deep relationships with service providers in the community. Other outreach organizations in the area such as REACH are experienced in serving people who live in DESC supportive housing units, for example. Nearly all DESC supportive housing programs also benefit from onsite partnerships with medical providers such as NeighborCare and Harborview.

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.

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 units are single occupancy studio apartments 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 increased 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.

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 1400 served. Of those 14, DESC rehoused or resheltered all but two. DESC supportive housing really is providing permanent homes for most people and eviction is very rare.

Quality of Living/Effects on the Neighborhood/Neighborhood Responsibility

How will DESC Woodland impact or affect the encampments in Woodland Park?

We know that people living outdoors need safe, stable, and affordable housing. DESC's building will address some of the need in the immediate area, especially for those people living with disabilities and greater vulnerability. In general, we do not see a large amount of interaction between people who live in DESC supportive housing buildings and people who live in nearby encampments,

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

Some DESC clients struggle with substance use issues. We work with people and connect them 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. DESC staff will actively follow-up on any violations of these expectations.

Will DESC Woodland'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 local police and fire departments help us to keep the number of 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 lived outside so the overall burden on crisis response systems in the broader community will go down.

What is DESC Woodland'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 or community member suspect that an individual exhibiting concerning behavior lives at the DESC Woodland 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 Woodland building, we would do our best to help resolve the matter.

Why does DESC do breakout sessions during their neighborhood meetings?

Ordinarily, DESC would like to meet in person with our neighbors and forego virtual meetings altogether. We are eager to get to a time when we can again discuss these important questions face-to-face. Because we must engage virtually for the time being, we thought that breaking into multiple groups would give more people a chance to ask more questions. We find that in a virtual space, not everyone feels comfortable speaking in front of a large group. By providing small groups, we believe we remove multiple barriers to communication. DESC then goes on to prepare documents such as this FAQ which encompasses the themes of the questions asked in all small groups.

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 is 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 without shelter in the area.

How will DESC help integrate tenants into the surrounding neighborhood?

DESC's tenants will all be permanent residents of the community. Some 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.

How does PSH affect property value?

A [study released by NYU's Furman Center in 2008](#) found that supportive housing does not have a negative impact on nearby property values. [According to the New York Times](#): "In the five years after the developments were opened, the study finds, the prices of buildings nearest the supportive housing development experienced "strong and steady growth," and appreciated more than comparable properties that were slightly farther away. In other words, the closer property owners lived to these often handsome developments, the better they fared."

What are you doing to make sure Clement Place issues with trash aren't repeated?

Staff are expected to do per-shift perimeter walks around the building and pick up trash if they encounter it. We find that what trash we find is often not stemming from our tenants, but we address it nonetheless.