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Seattle to fund 500 apartments to move homeless into housing ‘as fast as we can’

- ***The pilot project looks to cut costs and construction time by using alternative building methods such as modular and prefabricated building components.***

By LYNN PORTER
Journal Staff Reporter

The Seattle Office of Housing has begun a pilot project to get 500 small apartments for people experiencing homelessness built in the city quicker and for less cost by fall of 2021. The effort is to help with recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic.

Last week it issued a Notice of Funding Availability, at tinyurl.com/y9hgcfz9. Applications are due by July 8 for below-market-rate loans to help develop the permanent supportive apartments for single adults — likely studios or small efficiency dwelling units, according to Emily Alvarado, director of the office. It will hold pre-application teleconference meetings through Wednesday.

To keep down the cost and construction time, it is encouraging alternative building methods such as modular and prefabricated building components, and partnerships between builders and nonprofits using standard plans for the units.

The city also hopes to take advantage of the poor economy and the pandemic measures. It is encouraging the purchase of partially completed or permitted projects from developers who want to shield themselves from market risk. On top of that, it is looking to a recent city ordinance that, in light of the pandemic, allows for some design departures and speeds up the permitting process, according to Alvarado.

Seattle Housing Levy funds of up to \$60 million will be leveraged with state and federal resources to build and operate the housing, which must not cost more than \$250,000 per unit to build, exclusive of land and reserves. That building cost is less than for other housing the office has funded recently, Alvarado said.

“We’re in the middle of a public health emergency,” she said. Part of the solution is to move people who are homeless into housing “as fast as we can,” she said. “It’s challenging to social distance when you don’t have a home.”

For the pilot, which accelerates funding, pushes down costs and encourages expedited delivery, the city is seeking “creativity and innovation” from existing and new partners, she said. If successful, it could be a model for the county, region and state, she said.

The levy money for the pilot would have gone to create permanently affordable housing for people with incomes at or below 50% of the area median income, she said, while the city expects most of



Photo by Michael Walmsley [\[enlarge\]](#)

The 49-unit Marion West in Seattle’s University District was completed by the Low Income Housing Institute in 2016 to house homeless young adults and low-income workers.

the 500 units will be for those with incomes at or below 30%. Besides the homeless, they will go to people at immediate risk of becoming so.

Alvarado notes in the notice that the homelessness crisis has had a disproportionate impact on black and indigenous people and people of color.

Sharon Lee, executive director of the Low Income Housing Institute, a Seattle-based nonprofit housing developer, said that in King County 55% of homeless families with children are black. She said African Americans make up 32% of the homeless in the county, but only 6% of the population, quoting the 2019 Seattle/King County Point-in-Time Count of Persons Experiencing Homelessness.

Hispanic or Latino people make up 15% and American Indian or Alaska natives are 10%, according to the count.

“We’re very pleased that Mayor Durkan put forth this effort to stand up 500 units of permanent supportive housing for homeless people,” Lee said.

Traditionally low-income housing apartments are not standardized, she said. If you standardize them, perhaps using modules with fewer options for windows, facades and floor plans, you can cut waste, she said.

To outsiders \$250,000 may seem high to develop a studio or small efficiency dwelling unit, but low-income housing developers have lots of requirements to adhere to, including paying prevailing wages, competitive bidding and applying to multiples funding sources, she said.

The \$250,000 sets a new cost-per-unit target compared to what’s been built with public funds in Seattle, Lee said, noting LIHI hopes to develop some of the 500 units.

The housing is especially needed in the pandemic, she said, as emergency shelters don’t protect people from infectious diseases like COVID-19 or, for that matter, hepatitis and tuberculosis.

“You can’t go back to people sleeping just inches away from other people,” she said.

Alvarado said the city is working with local philanthropists who are asking the federal government for money for services and operating costs for the housing in the pilot.

Permanent supportive housing offers voluntary supportive services that may include counseling, behavioral and physical health support, and alcohol and drug treatment. The city notes that local research shows that 90%-95% of those residents remain housed a year later, and the housing delivers public cost savings because stably housed people do not use emergency medical services and in-patient behavioral health care.