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The UCLA Ziman Center for Real Estate presents a series of UCLA Affordable Housing Policy Briefs sponsored by the [UCLA Rosalinde and Arthur Gilbert Program in Real Estate, Finance and Urban Economics](#). For this September 2024 Brief, UCLA Ziman Center associate Jack Skelley provides an update on the work of [The Veterans Collective](#), the team delivering comprehensive housing and services on the West LA VA campus and making a significant impact on lifting Veterans and their families out of homelessness.

A Collective Solution for Unhoused Veterans

Supportive Housing at West LA VA Campus Makes a Transformational Impact

There are many proposed solutions to the affordable housing crisis. They include everything from time-efficient modular supportive housing design to upzoning and other land-use reforms. But there have been few large-scale projects or developments that make a serious dent in the unhoused population. Los Angeles has one such success with the endeavor piloted by [The Veterans Collective](#). Competitively selected, The Veterans Collective is the principal developer charged with expediting the delivery of supportive housing outlined in a master community plan to transform the West Los Angeles Veterans Administration (VA) campus into a thriving neighborhood of 1,700 residences on 80 acres for nearly 3,000 Veterans and their families.

Projected to be the largest supportive housing community for Veterans in the U.S., the development is well on its way. It occupies part of the 388-acre Veterans Administration site that has served Veterans since 1887 on some of the country's most valuable land. Comprising The Veterans Collective are two affordable housing developers ([Century Housing](#) and [Thomas Safran & Associates](#)) and [U.S. VETS](#), the national services and advocacy group devoted to preventing and ending Veteran homelessness. This team builds upon previous piecemeal housing programs on the site that are important but, by themselves, don't create the critical mass being done by The Veterans Collective project.

“Even one Veteran experiencing homelessness is unacceptable. Over the past six years, we have poured tremendous resources into developing and fulfilling the original vision and promise for the West LA VA campus—a place of healing where Veterans can easily access the services, resources, and amenities they need to rebuild their lives with dignity and respect.”

— Century Housing Senior VP Brian D’Andrea

“Our job as the principal developer is to make it work together,” said Century Housing Senior VP Brian D’Andrea. “A large-scale crisis is difficult to fix on a drip-drip-drip basis. This moves the needle in a larger way toward our goal: to get all Vets who need housing into housing.”

And these individuals become part of what The Veterans Collective calls “a vibrant, cohesive, and supportive residential neighborhood for homeless and at-risk Veterans and their families.”



The Veterans Collective has made significant progress on the community plan to build a neighborhood on the West LA VA campus with quality housing and comprehensive services.

IMPACT AND HISTORY

The most recent Greater Los Angeles Homeless Count by the [Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority](#) reported a 22.9% decline in unhoused Vets (approximately 4,000), compared to a 2.2% reduction for general homelessness.

D’Andrea points out that Veterans comprise a disproportionate share of LA County’s unhoused population and that providing for them not only lifts them from homelessness, but it also frees up needed shelter, homes and services for other needy populations.

“However, even one Veteran experiencing homelessness is unacceptable,” adds D’Andrea. “Over the past six years, we have poured tremendous resources into fulfilling the original vision for the West LA VA campus. We are creating a proud community for our nation’s heroes—a place of healing where Veterans can easily access the services, resources, and amenities they need to rebuild their lives with dignity and respect.”

The 22.9% decline in unhoused Veterans is significant precisely because of the services, says U.S. VETS CEO Stephen J. Peck.

“There are always Veterans facing crises,” he says. “So, as we’re driving down the number of unhoused Vets, we want to reach out to others before they lose their places of living.”

And, as the campus evolves into an attractive, healthy community for this population, there is less strain on besieged shelters, service agencies, police, hospitals and other entities serving the entire population.

At one point in the mid-20th century, the West Los Angeles site was home to over 5,000 Vets, receiving both housing and medical care. Over time, the campus fell into disrepair. Many of its older buildings were “red-tagged” as structurally unsound following the 1971 Sylmar earthquake. The VA mission evolved, replacing older residential buildings with medical facilities.

By the early 2000s, Los Angeles’ homeless crisis among Vets deepened. A mid-2010s lawsuit required the VA to draft a master plan with a minimum of 1,200 housing units. The Veterans Collective was selected to accelerate the delivery of these homes, and the services residents would need. Its first step was to evaluate necessary upgrades, infrastructure, and community planning—both within the campus and connecting to the surrounding Los Angeles communities while also securing necessary environmental clearances at the federal and state levels.

“For us, it’s not just bricks and sticks,” says D’Andrea. “We want a thriving community. A proud and proper home. That’s priority number-one as the principal developer.”

THE CHALLENGES OF BUILDING A VILLAGE

Among the three entities leading the Veterans Collective is affordable housing pioneer [Thomas Safran & Associates](#) (TSA). In 2023 TSA opened the doors of its initial VA supportive housing project to 59 formerly unhoused Veterans. A second TSA project, due end of 2024, is a modular building designed by Gehry Partners, LLP, with 118 units of supportive housing. (Gehry himself is a U.S. Army veteran.)

While the master plan is now making a significant dent in the Veterans’ housing crisis, its impact has not been immediate and requires many allies.

“The VA and developers can’t do it alone,” says TSA Senior VP of Development Tyler Monroe, who also serves on the UCLA Ziman Center Advisory Board and offers instruction with the Center’s [Howard and Irene Levine Affordable Housing Development Program](#). “We collaborate with the City and County of Los Angeles, State of California, as well as multiple energy, utility, and transportation agencies, as we introduce all-new infrastructure to the campus. It requires approval from those and many more entities to succeed in creating a village of this scale.”

This includes bus, rail, bike and pedestrian integration via Santa Monica’s Big Blue Bus system, and Metro Los Angeles. When it opens in 2027, Metro’s Purple Line subway (D Line extension) will include a stop at the VA Hospital, just north of Wilshire Boulevard.

“We make every effort to make it happen as quickly as possible, while ensuring the Vets won’t feel isolated at their new homes,” says Monroe.

All indications are that the additional housing will offer progress against the region’s housing crisis on a level not seen anywhere else in the U.S.: “This master plan is quickly becoming a national model. It is unique in its scale and complexity.”

INTERCONNECTED PROJECTS

Presently, there are 237 units in operation within four buildings. Six more buildings are under construction with 541 units which will be delivered by 2026. Another 234 residences are in active predevelopment and expected to start construction within the next one to two years. All these projects are permanent supportive housing, meaning their leased apartments come with a broad range of social and medical services.

Complementing this are the VA's other medical and housing programs. This includes the onsite "tiny home" and Bridge Housing programs created by the VA, the City and County of LA, as well as several transitional housing programs for Veterans with substance-use issues, for example, and the CalVet home project, which offers assisted living for up to 400 seniors.

The evolution of the West LA VA property from a dilapidated, medically oriented campus to a thriving residential community represents a massive redevelopment project. The Veterans Collective is restoring and reusing 16 historic structures; creating 12 new mixed-use buildings; and producing 100,000 square feet of new amenities and 10 new or revitalized community spaces. This includes restoring the [Wadsworth Chapel](#), the oldest remaining building on the VA campus. (The chapel and entire VA campus are on the National Register of Historic Places.)

D'Andrea estimates an overall \$1.4 billion project, of which more than \$860 million has been committed. The budgeting employs an all-hands-on-deck approach, with funding from many public agencies. In addition, some of these resources are philanthropic and attributable to a \$188.7 million capital campaign, the Veterans Promise Campaign, of which more than \$95 million has been raised. More can be learned [here](#).

"It's a transformational impact," says Peck. "And it makes the VA a welcoming place again."

The community plan offers in detail its land use, transportation, open space, recreational, historic, and medical components, along with the supportive housing developments and programming. It is [available here](#).

ALSO AT WORK: A FEDERAL LAWSUIT

Concurrent with the evolution of the West LA Veterans campus is the federal lawsuit that may further jump-start its delivery of new homes for Vets. A recent ruling by U.S. District Judge David O. Carter "ordered the VA to build 750 units of temporary housing on the campus in the next year and a half and come up with a plan in the next six months to build 1,800 units of permanent supportive housing for Veterans." ([Los Angeles Times](#)) This is in addition to the housing now quickly emerging from The Veterans Collective. It includes a proposed [Town Center](#) with needed shops, services, and social spaces – especially important since the campus is largely disconnected from surrounding Brentwood and Westwood. The Veterans Collective has stated: "We support the judge's order to commence development on the Town Center within 18 months and expect to meet this timetable." It states further, "This, together with important regulatory changes at the federal, state and local level will ensure that we can deliver housing to the Veterans who need it most."

