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Homeless gain homes at manor

South S.L. units offer permanent shelter, services

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SOUTH SALT LAKE — Utah philanthropists and poverty advocates made a dent in solving chronic homelessness Wednesday with the opening of an 84-unit apartment building in the city.

The Grace Mary Manor complex will provide permanent housing for men and women who have been homeless for at least a year and who suffer from debilitating conditions such as drug addiction, mental-health problems or physical disabilities.

"This is housing with low demands to help them deal with their issues," said Lloyd Pendleton, director of Utah's Homeless Task Force. "It gives them a chance to feel at home."

The Grace Mary Manor is evidence of a changing homeless advocacy philosophy, Pendleton said. Traditionally, the homeless are served first on the street, then in emergency shelters, then helped into temporary housing before they get permanent homes.

The changing philosophy, dubbed "housing first," turns that process on its head by first providing stable housing, then providing services. It has been recognized as a successful way to provide services nationally, according to the Salt Lake County's housing authority.

The new philosophy is based on evidence that providing permanent housing, even at no cost to residents, is cheaper than providing the chronically homeless with emergency services.

Only about 13 percent of Utah's 13,000 homeless people are chronically homeless, Pendleton said. That small percentage consumes 64 percent of resources used by the entire homeless population.

All apartments at the manor are studio apartments, outfitted with one black leather armchair, a flat screen television and DVD player and a full kitchen and bathroom. Each

of the beds is dressed with a handmade quilt, donated by an LDS congregation in Centerville.

"There is nothing like the dignity that a home provides — a permanent home," said Utah Gov. Jon Huntsman Jr. during the opening celebration.

Safety features include emergency pull cords, an intercom system, carbon monoxide detectors and ovens that automatically turn off every 30 minutes.

"A lot of these people have never cooked for themselves before," said Marcia Jarvis, assistant property manager of the facility.

The building also contains a weight room, a health clinic, counseling rooms, a library with a gas fireplace, computers and community rooms, one equipped with multiple leather sofas and a big-screen television.

"I am overwhelmed," said 45-year-old Trina Russon, who will be among the manor's first residents. "I'm so excited I am going to have this kind of stuff in my life. It's a gift from God and the community, with everybody working together."

Russon has lived in a tent along the Jordan River for three years. She was forced to leave an abusive relationship and subsequently got involved in drugs, she said. But with the help of homeless advocates and a stint in detox, Russon is ready to move on.

"I'm going to be able to go to school," she said. "I need to take some computer classes and get a high school diploma. You can't even get a job at McDonald's without that."

The manor is the second project of its kind in the Salt Lake Valley. Sunrise Metro Apartments were opened about one year ago in Salt Lake and have proved successful, Pendleton said.

"The train's out of the station on this plan to end chronic homelessness," said Salt Lake County Mayor Peter Corroon.

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