



# The Economics of Homelessness

**M**arc Trotz, Director of Housing & Urban Health at the San Francisco Department of Public Health presented on the Economics of Housing at the Florida Housing Coalition's annual statewide conference. He shared his experiences from San Francisco, where the health department and city and county governments put millions of dollars per year into permanent housing for the homeless. One of the examples he showcased was Mission Creek Senior Community developed by nonprofit Mercy Housing California. Mission Creek provides 139 units of affordable housing; fifty-one apartments are designated for formerly homeless and frail disabled seniors. The rents for the units are subsidized by the San Francisco Department of Public Health.

Mr. Trotz strongly believes that housing is a healthcare issue: the purpose of providing permanent housing for the homeless is to improve the health and well-being of a frail and vulnerable population, end the widespread phenomenon of people sleeping on the streets, and reduce costly over-utilization of emergency services.

Most housing advocates want the homeless housed because they believe it is immoral and inhumane to allow human beings to live and die on the streets of our communities. But housing the homeless is the right thing to do irrespective of any issues of morality; it is the right thing to do for our local economies.

The chronically homeless need permanent supportive housing. In Florida, we still find that the limited amount of supportive housing being built is restricted to housing those



**Mission Creek Senior Community** provides 139 units of affordable supportive housing to very low income seniors, with 51 units for the formerly homeless, frail elders and disabled. According to Tanya Boykin, Regional President for Resident Services at Mercy Housing, "these are not the homeless who were living in cars or with family members...these were the homeless that were sleeping by the dumpsters."

All are one-bedroom (500-600 sq ft), units. It is a mixed use project which includes a 6,000 square foot adult day health center (which is also open to seniors living nearby), an on-site manager, a parking garage, 3,100 square feet of ground floor retail space, and a community room. Once a week, a food bank is set up inside the community room. The development also includes a 7,500 square foot branch of the San Francisco public library. It is located in the heart of a redevelopment area, close to public transportation, shopping, medical services, a pharmacy, and recreational space.

who are "clean and sober." In cities like Seattle, Denver, and San Francisco, the providers and their local government partners recognize that it is to the public's benefit as well as to the benefit of chronic inebriates and drug addicts that they be permanently housed with supportive services. Unfortunately, too many people argue against such programs because they believe the homeless with substance abuse problems or mental illness are not deserving of public assistance. Something worth considering is that the homeless population will continue to grow as more veterans return from Iraq. Right now, veterans are 25 percent of the homeless people in the United States, though they are only 11 percent of the general adult population, according to a report released in November, 2007 by the Alliance to End Homelessness, a national public education nonprofit.



Marc Trotz

Unfortunate, because keeping the homeless on the streets is bad for the homeless, and bad for the rest of us, both morally and economically.

