



‘Desert Hope’ Promised a Model for Transitioning Unhoused. Now, Tenants and Staff Say It's a Neglected Property.

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Las Cruces Sun's [original article](#)

For the majority of time Paul Bryce has lived in Las Cruces, he's struggled with housing. He says he's lived in the city about seven or eight years, but he can't be certain.

“When you're out on the street, a day turns into a week, turns into a month, turns into a year,” Bryce, 55, who's originally from California, said. “So I'm just guessing.”

But for the last 10 months, Bryce has had a place to call his own. He was one of over two dozen people to move into the Desert Hope Apartments on Pecos Street last August, when the complex opened to tenants. Desert Hope is a 40-unit affordable housing development serving previously unhoused people. It's one block east of Solano Drive between Idaho Avenue and Foster Road.

“I've gone through the whole process, from a bush down at the river, to Camp Hope, to Desert Hope. I've seen the whole thing,” Bryce said. “I see what (Mesilla Valley) Community of Hope does — phenomenal. If anybody wanted to restart over, anywhere, this is the place to start.”

It's been a shame then, according to Bryce and others who live and work at the complex, that the property has been neglected by the agency that owns it.

“There's only a handful of people (at Desert Hope) that are really the issues, and I can't really fault them. Because the way society is today, the way the economy is today, people are going to do what they're going to do,” Bryce said. “But to do it without impunity. That's not right.”

There's drug use and litter. A community grill and bike pump have been broken for months — parts were stolen out of the grill. Residents give out their gate codes, allowing friends to come and go, not to mention the gates don't secure properly when closed due to broken springs.

Desert Hope is what's known as a permanent supportive housing development. It not only provides affordable rents, but tenants are able to access social services on site to help them address food insecurity, joblessness or behavioral health needs.

The theory is to “get people into the housing and let them get stabilized there, and then start working on what are other issues they want to deal with,” explained Steve Berg, vice president for programs and policy at the National Alliance to End Homelessness.

Desert Hope's community room has a phone, computers, numerous brochures and a staff member available to help residents figure out what services they can access through community organizations and submit applications if necessary. A fridge and pantry for residents are stocked regularly by Casa de Peregrinos, and toiletries and other household items can be given out by request.

Though the building is owned and was renovated by Mesilla Valley Public Housing Authority, the City of Las Cruces served as a funding partner in the project, having provided \$500,000 through its Telshor Facility Fund, a reserve meant to assist the most vulnerable in the city, and \$200,000 in federal HOME funds. Desert Hope also received \$6 million in funding through the New Mexico Mortgage Finance Authority.

At Desert Hope, a tenant's rent is based on their annual income. A tenant is required to pay up to 30 percent of their annual income toward a unit's rent. Rental assistance is available to cover what they can't pay.

The Mesilla Valley Community of Hope, a local nonprofit which provides food, shelter and other services to the city's unhoused population, is in charge of administering the supportive services offered to Desert Hope tenants.

Jorge Ochoa is a Community of Hope employee who works at Desert Hope as the housing complex's support services case manager. In that role, Ochoa helps connect

residents with behavioral health or employment services, organizes group activities and drives residents to run errands.

The Mesilla Valley Public Housing Authority is tasked with everything else, including the management of the property and processing new and existing leases.

But the management of the property has fallen by the wayside.

Darrell Williamson said he was optimistic when the vision for Desert Hope was presented to him.

Williamson, 41, is a former Camp Hope resident who now lives at Desert Hope with his five-month-old puppy, Lilith. But he's not keen on staying, telling the *Sun-News* the complex is plagued with problems — most of them stemming from a lack of management by the public housing authority.

Williamson said Desert Hope made a lot of promises that sounded great on paper, but he says the public housing authority lacked follow-through.

“Once we got into it, it was like ‘Oh, no, y’all can't do none of that. No, we changed everything,’” Williamson said. “But you still want me to hold up my end of the bargain?”

Not only is the property being neglected, but Williamson said he was told he wasn't allowed to make more than \$11,000 a year as a tenant or he'd risk not qualifying for his unit — the opposite of what he was initially told. That was a contributing factor in him leaving a job he got at a local restaurant. He said it's like MVPHA wants him to stay in poverty.

Williamson said he became so fed up with the issues at Desert Hope that he went to stay with family out of state for three months, despite having a recently refurbished studio apartment he was still renting.

Jorge Ochoa, Support Services Case Manager at Mesilla Valley Community of Hope, speaks to community members about the state of Desert Hope on Wednesday, June 15, 2022.

Ochoa is currently the only staff member on site, and though a second staff member is starting soon, Ochoa is the main point of contact, though he has no power to manage the property. He has also had issues with MVPHA, saying there's a lack of urgency to address issues that arise. Ochoa has only seen an MVPHA property manager visit three times since March, when he took over for the previous case manager.

Despite a row of mailboxes, mail delivery is still not possible at the apartments, so Ochoa picks up residents' mail at the post office twice a week.

The lack of management ranges from MVPHA not enforcing the complex's visitor policy, where people can have guests for up to a week, to not performing minor maintenance. Williamson said he's had light bulbs go out in his living room and bathroom that have gone months without being replaced, meaning he can't write, read or paint when he wants.

“I want to be in a position where I can just sit down and read, don't have to worry about that crap and the fighting and the arguing or whatever the hell is going on outside my door,” Williamson said. “I want to be somewhere peaceful.”

Ochoa said MVPHA has contacted tenants for rent after they've already paid and seems to lose important paperwork. Despite hand-delivering housing assistance recertification paperwork to the MVPHA office, Ochoa said he'll get emails from the agency claiming to have never received it.

At this point, Williamson is debating whether to renew his lease.

“It has potential,” Williamson says about the Desert Hope model. “With the right energy behind it and the right tenants that's willing to put in ... that work. It's a really good idea if everybody was on one page.”

When asked about the lack of management, Juan Olvera, executive director of MVPHA, said he was unavailable for an interview and instead provided the Sun-News with a lengthy email in which he defined the Mesilla Valley Community of Hope, Desert Hope and MVPHA and explained the relationship between the three.

Olvera did say the agency is currently in talks to hire a third-party company to manage Desert Hope, as he said is common for some of the agency's properties. While Olvera wrote that the hiring of a third-party management company was always “planned,” he didn't have an exact timeline for when that would happen and could only say MVPHA's aim was to retain a company in the next few weeks.

So far, Olvera said the property has been managed “properly.”

“MVPHA is highly qualified and has been providing the on-site management at the property, along with resident services by Mesilla Valley Community of Hope,” Olvera said in the email. “So, if someone were to say that MVPHA staff were ‘barely’ on site or available, that would be incorrect.”

The perception that Desert Hope has no property manager, Olvera added, could stem from the recent resignation of the staff member assigned to the complex.

“We have been temporarily covering the on-site role with other staff in the interim until a new person is assigned to that role,” Olvera wrote.

Olvera confirmed residents must fall within certain income restrictions to be eligible for an apartment, as per the guidelines for the housing assistance programs in use there.

Residents who live in homes surrounding the apartments have complained that since Desert Hope opened, the number of unhoused people present in their neighborhood has increased — apparently many who are not tenants of the complex itself. Many oppose a proposed expansion of the property, which would involve the renovation of adjacent storage units.

Neighbors have complained about an uptick in human feces, urine and syringes outside their homes. Some say unhoused people sleep on or near their properties, attempt to get inside their homes through unlocked doors or ask for money, sometimes in an aggressive manner.

“I don't think I should have to move from where I live,” said Diana Diaz, whose family has owned property on Pecos Street for decades, during a June 15 public meeting about Desert Hope. “It's not like I'm against (the homeless). I'm against what's happening in my neighborhood.”

“We have to do all these changes, and what do they do? What did they get away with? Where are our rights?” said Yvonne Lopez during the same meeting. “I'm not against (the homeless). I'll help them, but where are our rights? Here we are giving them more and more and more rights. What about us?”

“The visibility of homeless people in that area does tend to make people think that they are tied to crime,” said Nicole Martinez, executive director of Community of Hope. “And that's not a new notion. You look at articles or literature on those kinds of ideas, that it's easy for people to make those associations who already have preconceived notions about people experiencing homelessness as criminals.”

Berg said it's important for permanent supportive housing developments to foster healthy socialization.

“People need other people,” Berg said. “If somebody's been living on the streets for a number of years, which is often the case, what friends they have are probably other people who are living on the streets, and if they're involved in a drug abuse culture, it's probably other people who are doing that.”

“If people get into apartments, but there's nothing in place to substitute some other kind of social networks, then a lot of times they will find the people they used to hang out with on the street,” Berg said.

Martinez said she doesn't believe the solution is to block Desert Hope's expansion. Bryce and Williamson said they don't believe the project should be expanded in its current condition.

“If you don't want to see homeless people then help us house them, help us to provide more affordable housing, and that doesn't mean that it's going to be bringing more crime to your area,” Martinez said.

Martinez said she does have concerns about the aggressive rhetoric toward the unhoused translating into policies at the local level that focus more on incarceration instead of assistance. While she hopes it doesn't happen, she has to consider it as a possibility.

“I think that overall we've just seen this collective aggression that's happening, where people think that it's okay to say dehumanizing things and to act in aggressive ways,” Martinez said. “And I'm really hopeful that it doesn't seep into our local politics and that we continue to utilize those evidence-based practices going forward with services that are provided for people without homes.”