

County of Sonoma

Regarding Elderberry Commons

April 11, 2023



Dear Sebastopol Neighbors –

We wanted to take this time to update you concerning the County of Sonoma’s activities related to the Sebastopol Inn (or Elderberry Commons). We recognize what an important housing asset this is for Sebastopol and for those sheltered there now, many of whom came from an unhoused environment. The County has appreciated its relationship with the City of Sebastopol and service provider partners in making Elderberry a success.

As the COVID-19 pandemic ends, the County teams have been working to transition Elderberry to its **permanent use** as envisioned when the County and the City worked with the State to purchase it via [Project Homekey](#) Round #1. That use is for “permanent supportive housing” or “PSH”. PSH is a housing environment whereby individuals and families live in their long-term home but have supportive services to ensure that they stay successfully housed. These services can include behavioral health care, substance use disorder counseling, benefit navigation, budgeting and financial planning, and more.

Up to now, Elderberry Commons has served a different purpose. It has been operating as a temporary non-congregate shelter for COVID-19 vulnerable individuals. About 12-14 people are sheltering at Elderberry today, while about 35 other individuals who have sheltered at Elderberry have since moved on to other housing locations. Length of stay has ranged from about three months to more than two years.

We recognize that this transition to permanent supportive housing is not an easy one. It means that we’ll have a construction period (which could be several months) and that individuals who shelter there today will have to relocate. Further, they may not qualify to move back once the conversation to PSH use is completed. While this was made clear to all of those who were housed there by way of the entry agreements they signed at the time of admittance, we recognize that this is still a hard step. The folks who shelter at Elderberry now are in a great place, rent-free, in a great community. Who wouldn’t want to be there?

The rules involving permanent supportive housing are pretty clear. Individuals who will live at Elderberry in its PSH status will have to be referred through [Coordinated Entry](#), which is a complex but necessary system that prioritizes people in order of need for housing. Some very vulnerable, deserving people are next on the list for PSH projects like Elderberry. Some may be from Sebastopol, some might be from Elderberry Commons today, but all will have to be referred in a priority order via a fair and transparent system.

Regardless, we are working diligently to help each of those currently at Elderberry Commons to relocate. Each person sheltering at Elderberry today has housing navigation and caseworkers

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assigned to them to help them move towards their next step. We don't want anyone without housing if we can help it.

While this is a difficult change, it's an important one. Permanent Supportive Housing is a key part of reaching **functional zero** in homelessness. PSH is a long-term tenancy (like an apartment rental) and not an interim housing use. It means that people there can stay longer (or in some cases indefinitely) as if in an apartment setting. Our region is short 1,000 units of permanent supportive housing, and Elderberry is a small but important step towards getting there.

Attached is a brief FAQ that we have prepared to help answer some of the questions we've heard. If there are questions we have not addressed, please email those questions to me at dave.kiff@sonoma-county.org.

Thank you,

Dave Kiff

Division Director, Homelessness Services Division
Sonoma County Department of Health Services

FAQ

About Elderberry Commons

Elderberry Commons (the former Sebastopol Inn) consists of 28 individual shelter units plus two rooms used by staff. It was developed as a non-congregate shelter (NCS) during the COVID-19 emergency. The property was acquired using Project Homekey funds, a State program that allowed for the purchase of hotels, motels, or apartment buildings for either interim housing uses or interim housing uses that will be transitioned into permanent housing. The Elderberry Commons homekey award assumed the latter - that it would serve as interim housing but be transitioned to permanent over time.

With the ending of the COVID-19 emergency, including the ending of critical program funding, it is time to convert the NCS units into permanent supportive housing. All 28 shelter units will be vacated while being converted to permanent supportive housing and reopen when construction is complete. Construction may take several months depending on supplies, permitting, unanticipated building issues, and labor availability.

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Is the Elderberry Commons closing?

No. The Elderberry Commons is transitioning from a non-congregate shelter (currently interim housing in motel rooms) to permanent supportive housing (more permanent, apartment-like life). This requires the site to be vacated (as soon as mid-April 2023) so that the rooms can undergo construction to add kitchenettes including related plumbing and electrical changes and to make accessibility improvements.

Why is the transition happening now?

As federal and state COVID-19 benefits end, and as the site is no longer needed as a non-congregate shelter site, Elderberry Commons will begin transitioning to its intended use as a long-term permanent housing with wrap-around services. Project Homekey funds were awarded to help acquire the site to be used temporarily as a non-congregate shelter and then converted to permanent supportive housing once the emergency ended.

What about the people currently being sheltered there?

Persons who are being sheltered at Elderberry were asked upon entry to sign an agreement whereby they “acknowledge and accept this is temporary non-congregate shelter and shall not be construed as a tenancy or giving rise to a tenancy.” Individuals were made further aware in early February 2023 that the Elderberry Commons was transitioning from an alternative shelter site to permanent supportive housing.

Individuals currently staying at the site have been working with case workers and housing navigators to identify housing alternatives. Some persons with medical needs may be eligible to transition to the Mickey Zane Place site in Santa Rosa. Individuals with Housing Choice Vouchers, Emergency Housing Vouchers or Mainstream Vouchers are working to secure permanent housing both in and out of the county.

What are Housing Vouchers?

The Housing Voucher system is a [rental assistance program](#) (via the US Department of Housing and Urban Development) that is used to assist low-income families, individuals, the elderly, and the disabled to afford decent, safe, and sanitary housing. Rental assistance vouchers are one of the best tools available to use existing housing stock to or help those who qualify find a place to live in Sonoma County’s tight rental market.

But there are not nearly enough of them to meet local need - nor are there enough property owners interested in leasing properties.

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All vouchers are issued in accordance with federal regulations and are waitlist-based because the demand exceeds supply. For homeless dedicated project based vouchers, the Sonoma County Housing Authority accepts referrals, when vouchers are available, from the Coordinated Entry System or referrals from Continuum of Care (CoC) service providers.

What is Permanent Supportive Housing (PSH)?

Permanent supportive housing is long-term leasing (i.e. permanent housing for an individual or a family) or rental assistance combined with supportive services such as health and mental health care for chronically homeless households. This specific type of housing is in great need in Sonoma County, as identified by a recent [Strategic Plan](#) that the County of Sonoma and the Sonoma County Continuum of Care adopted in December 2022 and January 2023.

Who will manage Elderberry once it becomes PSH?

That's yet to be determined, but the County did issue a Request for Proposals from qualified contractors, property owners, and service providers. We received qualified responses from known local entities that we were happy with. But ultimately that will be a decision for the Sonoma County Board of Supervisors based on recommendations from staff from the Sonoma County Community Development Commission (CDC).

What will I notice after the change to PSH?

You might not notice much - but importantly, the use changes from interim use (where persons sheltering there don't have a lease) to permanent housing, such as an apartment (where persons will have a lease or similar housing agreement). There are hundreds of PSH units across Sonoma County, and most neighbors are unaware that they are PSH - just that they are pretty typical neighbors. In a leased housing environment, typically security is not needed (a person can be evicted for lease violations), persons shop and cook for themselves (thus the need for kitchenettes) and life is fairly similar to any other apartment building.

Can the same individuals who are sheltering at Elderberry Commons today come back when the renovations are complete?

Once the construction is complete, and in turn, the transition to permanent supportive housing is complete, individuals will be referred to Elderberry through Coordinated Entry. Accepting referrals through Coordinated Entry is a requirement of California's Project Homekey program.

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Coordinated Entry is a nationwide process (but set up in regions, such as the [Sonoma County CE system](#)).

Coordinated Entry (CE), in short, is a housing prioritization system that works from a list of unhoused people interested in and eligible for housing. Generally, to be eligible for a permanent supportive housing placement like Elderberry, a person must be homeless (including sheltered or unsheltered homeless) for at least a year and have one or more disabilities. They must be entered into the CE system, typically by a local service provider. The local service provider also typically conducts an assessment of each person's vulnerabilities - for example, a physical or mental illness, other disabilities, and other life experiences that resulted in their homelessness.

Our local prioritization policy for Coordinated Entry states that the CE program will attempt to house the most vulnerable eligible individuals and families first. This system is used for referrals to all homeless-dedicated housing interventions. It is designed to ensure that everyone who is experiencing homelessness is able to access housing in a fair and equitable manner.

What can Sebastopol community members do to help?

The county and its two housing authorities encourage landlords to become partners for housing voucher clients and other rental assistance clients - like those being sheltered at Elderberry Commons. If you own a property and are a person willing to do a home share, rent out a room, or know of a home share, individuals from Elderberry Commons may be good candidates for your rental or sharing arrangement.

Please email us at the Sonoma County Housing Authority if you have a room or housing property that you would be interested in renting to a person currently at the Elderberry Commons - reach out to HousingHeroes@sonoma-county.org. Groups like SHARE Sonoma County are also helpful in developing room and home sharing arrangements of like-minded individuals. You can contact SHARE at info@sharesonomacounty.org

Thank you for your interest in Elderberry Commons and those who shelter there.