

# **Reimagining Permanent Supportive Housing: Why Lived-Experience Support Is Essential for Successful Transitions”**

**LeaJay Harper**

## **1. Opening (1 minute)**

Good evening , and thank you for the opportunity to speak today.

My name is LeaJay Harper and I was unhoused on Wood St for 10 years and became housed at Homefulness in Dec 2023

People who have never experienced homelessness cannot fully understand the day-to-day skills, adjustments, and emotional challenges required to transition from encampments to permanent housing.

If we want long-term housing stability in Alameda County, we must invest in peer-led support, experience-based coaching, and hands-on transition assistance that meets people where they are.

## **2. The Gap: What Traditional Services Miss (2 minutes)**

Case managers and service providers do incredible work, but their support is often paper-based, appointment-based, and time-limited.

What is missing are the in-between moments—the everyday tasks that determine whether someone successfully adapts to housing:

- How do I cook on a standard stove after years of using propane?
- How do I budget when I suddenly have rent, PG&E, and laundry costs?
- How do I keep up with appointments now that I live farther away?
- Where is the nearest grocery store or food pantry?
- How do I ride the bus to my medical provider?
- Who helps me update my address with the county, CalFresh, or Social Security?

These are things most people never think about. But they are daily barriers for people who have been living in encampments for years.

## **3. Why Peer Support Is Essential (2 minutes)**

Peers—people who have lived through homelessness and successfully stabilized in housing—are in a unique position to teach these skills.

Peers can:

- Show someone how to operate appliances safely
- Teach budgeting in a real-world way
- Help plan laundry schedules so people don't fall behind
- Ride the bus with someone their first time
- Call a medical provider with someone so they learn how to do it
- Help someone reconnect to community instead of being isolated in a unit

These supports are not theoretical. They require lived experience, patience, and understanding.

As I've experienced personally:

When I moved from Wood Street to East Oakland, I didn't know where food pantries were. I didn't know the neighborhood. Even though I had a car, I still found myself isolated. That sense of disconnection is common—and dangerous—for people newly housed.

#### **4. The Risk of Isolation (1 minute)**

People often move from highly interdependent encampment communities—where people keep each other safe—into apartments where they are completely alone.

This sudden isolation contributes to:

- Loneliness and depression
- Disconnection from support systems
- Missed appointments
- Difficulty managing new responsibilities
- Higher risk of losing housing

Without emotional and community support, housing can become unstable, even when someone desperately wants to succeed.

## **5. Reimagining “Permanent Supportive Housing” (2 minutes)**

Permanent Supportive Housing should not just be:

- A unit
- A case manager
- A stack of referrals

It should be a community.

We need to redefine PSH to include:

### **A Peer Leadership Pipeline**

People who have been housed longer can become mentors—like big brothers and big sisters—to new residents entering housing.

### **Hands-On Transition Coaches**

Not people who do things for clients, but people who do them with clients:

- Cooking together
- Budgeting together
- Calling providers together
- Riding transit together
- Visiting food pantries together
- Going to first appointments together

This is how people rebuild confidence and independence.

### **Skill Development + Case Management**

Peers can work alongside case managers to create a more holistic and realistic support model.

## **6. Recommendations for Measure W Funding (1 minute)**

### **1. Fund a Countywide Peer Navigation & Transition Support Program**

- Train and hire people with lived experience
- Embed them in PSH sites and housing placement programs

- Pay peers equitably as specialized staff

## **2. Create a Transitional Housing Orientation Curriculum**

Hands-on training for new residents that includes:

- Daily living skills
- Budgeting with rent + utilities
- Navigating transit
- Accessing food, healthcare, and benefits
- Community integration, not isolation

## **3. Support a Peer Leadership Ladder**

- Create pathways for formerly unhoused residents to:
  - Mentor others
  - Lead community events
  - Participate in program decision-making
  - Build careers in outreach and case management

## **4. Fund Community-Building Activities Inside PSH**

People stabilize faster when they are connected. Cooking nights, resource tours, support circles, and skill-building workshops matter.

## **7.Closing (1 minute)**

If we want Measure W to have lasting impact, we must go beyond housing placement.

We must invest in people, community, and lived experience.

Peer-led support is not an optional service—it is the bridge that makes housing sustainable.

Thank you for your time, and I welcome any questions.

## Measure W - Talking Points

I. What is the Facemask Crew? How did we get our name?  
How did it come about?

II. When we serve and what we do?

III. How should measure funds be used based on what we see?

Measure Funds should be used to provide:

### 1. Housing

- a. Shelters - There are not enough available beds for referrals
- b. Long term and short housing options

### 2. Increased access to mobile services

- a. Showers
- b. Medical Services - Street team
- c. Mobile ID Unit
- d. Dedicated trash pick up

### 3. Food

- a. Access to healthy food options that can be provided for those not able or unwilling to leave their place and things

### 4. Substance and Mental Health Services

### 5. Community Homeless Resource Centers - drop-in, referrals, case management, showers, food, skills building - transitional services

(mention the children and families)

# From Streets to Stability: Real Talk About Employment & Housing

- Presented by: **Victor Mavedzenge, Founder/Program Manager, Kinara-Pathways to Community Success**
- Location: Castro Valley, CA
- Duration: 10 minutes



# The Ground Truth

- We've tried incentives, training, shelters, outreach.
- The money's there — the outcomes aren't.
- Why? Because our systems move slower than our people's needs.



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# What Still Works (When We Get Out of the Way)

- Paid Transitional Employment + Mentorship: Programs paying stipends keep folks engaged.
- On-Site Case Management improves retention.
- Person-Designed Plans: When participants co-write their plan, success rates double.



# What's Not Working (Despite Good Intentions)

- Business Incentives Alone: Tax breaks don't equal job stability.
- Shelters Without Continuity: Beds fill, but people spin back to square one.
- Red Tape in Volunteer & Job-Training Payments: Rules classify stipends as income, delaying payments.



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# The Human Toll of Bureaucracy

- The system demands compliance before compassion.
- People who finally say 'yes' to help end up waiting for approvals.
- We lose them not to drugs or laziness — but to delay fatigue.



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# The Mirror Within Moment (Victor Mavedzenge Insight)

- “When someone’s inner mirror is cracked, no external reflection makes sense.”
- If someone’s internal story is 'I’m temporary,' they’ll treat every win as temporary.
- Healing identity and fixing bureaucracy must happen side-by-side.

# Lessons from the Field (Hayward)

- 70% of job-program participants lost momentum due to payment delays.
- Those who received steady mentorship — even without full pay — stayed engaged.
- Belief + consistency beat incentives + chaos every time.

# County Opportunity: Flip the Script

- Streamline stipend approvals.
- Pre-qualify nonprofits for quicker disbursements.
- Treat stipends as education, not employment, to reduce barriers.



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# The 5-Point Plan (Action, Not Theory)

- 1. One Unified Navigation Hub — Housing, health, and jobs under one roof.
- 2. Rapid-Pay System — County-approved prepaid cards for stipends.
- 3. Retention Partnerships — Fund employer + caseworker duos.
- 4. Bridge Housing With Purpose — Transitional homes tied to real work.
- 5. Identity-Centered Coaching — Rebuild self-image, not just job skills.

# Closing: The Real Ask

- “Programs don’t keep people stable — people do.”
- Let’s stop measuring success in forms processed.
- Let’s measure it in lives that no longer need our forms.
- Hayward can lead the shift — if we cut the red tape and see the human first.



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