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This Skid Row theater group is using art to address the healthcare crisis for the unhoused, even in the face of funding cuts

Los Angeles Poverty Department combines theater and public discussions to push for a recuperative care model proven successful during the Covid-19 pandemic. Now, government cuts threaten to curtail the project.



A scene from The Covid Hotel Welcomes You to the Future. Photo by Monica Nouwens.

This month marks the 2-year anniversary of the declared end of the global pandemic, and three years since Los Angeles Poverty Department (LAPD) began to create “The Covid Hotel Welcomes You to the Future,” a multidisciplinary art project about healthcare innovations implemented during Covid-19.

The project familiarizes audiences and experts with the proven model of care employed by LA County’s Housing for Health staff during the pandemic. The practitioners quickly saw that their innovative model was transforming outcomes for homeless patients. Now, LAPD is in the middle of a county-wide tour to share this message across LA County. But with recent funding cuts, the group has had to get creative in their mission to spread what they believe is a vital message.

In 2022, LAPD—a small Skid Row-based arts organization, with many members who have lived experience of being unhoused—set out to document this little-known success story from the Covid pandemic. From 2020-2022, LA County’s Department of Health Services (DHS) set up and ran emergency medical shelters for homeless patients with no place to quarantine. Over two years, 13,000+ people were treated at thirteen “Covid Hotel” sites. There were countless cases of dramatic improvements in patients’ overall health, and an impressively high rate (93%) of housing placements. Witnessing their success proved transformative for the frontline workers—doctors, nurses, mental health clinicians, and social workers—who became convinced that the



recuperative care model they developed in the crisis could improve access to healthcare and housing throughout LA. From March to December 2024, LAPD's Skid Row History Museum & Archive told the stories of these frontline workers in "Welcome to the Covid Hotel," a multidisciplinary art exhibition and series of public conversations that engaged audiences with lessons learned at the Covid Hotels.

Sharing these frontline workers' conviction that they had hit upon a model that could address LA's homelessness crisis, LAPD went on to develop "The Covid Hotel Welcomes You to the Future," a theatrical performance distilled from interviews and conversations with over fifty frontline medical staff, as well as the theater group members' own efforts to get unhoused neighbors housed.

Today, LAPD is touring the show to highlight the need for a new approach to healthcare throughout LA County. "We decided to do it because in conversations with community and frontline workers, everyone said, 'these ideas should be everywhere,' says John Malpede, LAPD's artistic director. "So we said, okay, we'll do something totally outrageous and try to take it to all the areas of the county." The sprawling 4,000-plus miles of LA County is broken into eight Service Planning Areas, or SPAs, which control how the county distributes resources and plans initiatives. LAPD's tour—12 performances in all—aims to include at least one performance in each SPA, visiting neighborhoods as far-flung as Lancaster, Claremont, and San Pedro, with many stops in between. Each performance is followed by a panel discussion with local experts on the unique challenges and opportunities around healthcare and housing in their part of the county.

For the small Skid Row group, it's an ambitious undertaking in the best of times, but as with most small arts organizations, a barrage of grant terminations from the project's government funders (IMLS, NEH, and California Humanities) has made the project particularly challenging. Convinced that their message is timely and important, the group has vowed to continue their work, and is now focusing on bringing the performance to low-cost, accessible venues such as public libraries and progressive interim housing sites in their quest to spread the message of "The Covid Hotel Welcomes You to the Future." "If there's ever a time to do an outsized effort, it's now," says Malpede. "What's the alternative? Shrinking in the corner?"

Still, LAPD's future projects may not be so fortunate. As a culminating piece of their Covid Hotel advocacy, LAPD had planned to produce a book-length publication that would keep sharing the story of how LA County is addressing homelessness—and what is possible with low-barrier, compassionate healthcare systems. With the loss of grant funding, the future of this publication is now uncertain. Similarly, a planned project around Single Room Occupancy hotels is endangered because of funding cuts, and without a new source of support, the group may not have the opportunity to draw attention to this important issue that has affected a number of its members.

Nevertheless, performances for "The Covid Hotel Welcomes You to the Future" continue undaunted, with LAPD's members determined to share a hopeful vision of the future, where a compassionate system allows anyone to access housing and healthcare.

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Upcoming performances:

May 28, 1 pm: Lancaster Public Library, 601 W Lancaster Blvd, Lancaster, CA 93534, with panelists Christopher Boyd (VelNonArt Transformative Health), Melissa Ivory (community advocate), and James Evans (community advocate).

June 4, 3:30 pm, Van Nuys Public Library, 6250 Sylmar Ave, Van Nuys, CA 91401, with panelists Alisa Osunfunke Orduna (Florence Aliese Advancement Network), Carla Orendorff (Aetna Street Solidarity), and Giselle “Gelly” Harrell (SFV Homeless Union). Orduna, former liaison for Skid Row with the Los Angeles City mayor’s office, will share her experience of convening Skid Row residents to imagine and realize the ReFresh Spot—a 24 hour hygiene center—while Mayor Garcetti’s liaison to Skid Row, and her equivalent role as consultant to the County Department of Health Services in leading community envisioning of the Skid Row Action Plan and realizing the Skid Row Care Campus. Orendorff and Harrell are working with their community to realize similar amenities in Van Nuys.

June 7, 8:20 pm, *This Home, Forever* performance series, organized by Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions (LACE) at Heidi Duckler Studio, 1206 Maple Ave., Ste. 1100B, Los Angeles, CA 90015 (Bendix Building).

Find a full record of the Covid Hotel project, including full panel conversations and upcoming performances, at <https://www.lapovertydept.org/projects/welcome-to-the-covid-hotel/>

ABOUT LOS ANGELES POVERTY DEPARTMENT

Los Angeles Poverty Department is a multi-disciplinary arts organization that produces and presents artworks and events that instantiate the existence of the Skid Row community—affirming its assets, advocating for its rights, and supporting its aspirations. LAPD projects interweave exhibitions, publications, theatrical performances, public conversations, and cultural events. Programs are developed, produced, and performed collaboratively with Skid Row community members. Founded in 1985 by John Malpede, LAPD was the first performance group in the nation made up principally of homeless people, and the first arts program of any kind for homeless people in Los Angeles.