



# community working group

## Thresholds

Developing Opportunities for Affordable Homes

### Thank You for Investing in CWG

**I**n Silicon Valley savvy investors gravitate to organizations that show promise for significant return. I am delighted that CWG is seeing rich rewards as a result of our collective investment in the well-being of local families and individuals in need!



Our investments look a little different from most in this high-tech area. We spend our funds on building and maintaining affordable homes, providing rental subsidies, and supporting the delivery of rehabilitative services. Still, like all smart investors, our donors give because they see the potential for great return on investment (ROI).

Our ROI takes the form of lives transformed. An individual receives employment services and becomes a wage earner. A child's school performance improves because he is living in a stable home instead of a relative's garage. Our payoff is the possibility of interrupting the cycle of poverty, which benefits generations to come. We believe our potential for strong ROI is enormous — while the cost of inaction in the fight against homelessness will certainly result in a net loss for us all.

Thank you for choosing to stand with us in our work. I'm sure you agree that the stakes don't get any higher.

Best wishes,

John Barton  
President, Board of Directors,  
Community Working Group



Yoga helps Lydia and other Opportunity Center clients manage their health and well-being. (From left: instructor, Lydia, past OC clients.)

"THIS PLACE IS AN OASIS"

### Local Woman Rebuilds Her Life

**I**t took Lydia\* more than 55 years to find a family to call her own. That's when, after being homeless and near-homeless for most of her life, she went to the Opportunity Center. "I built the family I was looking for here," Lydia said.

The Opportunity Center, CWG's flagship project, includes 88 homes and diverse services for homeless and formerly homeless women, men and children. Lydia sought help at the Opportunity Center after leaving an abusive relationship that lasted for 10 years. "By the time I got here I was scared of everybody. I would just sit in a corner and say, 'don't talk

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## 801 Alma Family Housing Helps Families Make the Dream Come True

**T**hirty or forty years ago, we learned that if we worked hard, stayed in school, and saved our money, we could realize the American dream: a stable home and upward mobility for our children. Not so in 2015 Silicon Valley. What once may have been identified as a middle class family is now the one you see struggling to keep its footing. With the majority of earnings needed to pay rent, families are slipping rapidly toward extreme poverty and homelessness. At Community Working Group, we strive to bring the American dream back into focus for our working families, with affordable rents and services to help them build skills, stay employed, and plan ahead for children's education or a rainy day.

CWG and partner agency Eden Housing worked together to make 801 Alma Family Housing a reality and continue to partner to enable service delivery. The facility's very low-income, working residents include child care workers, senior care providers, grocery store clerks, and others we depend on to keep our community humming every day. Most residents earn between 30 and 50 percent of median income for this area, which means a range of annual earnings between \$21,000 and \$52,000 for a family of four.

Rents are affordable, at less than 30% of residents' income, and residents have access to an on-site referral service to connect them with important resources and



Low-income working families at 801 Alma enjoy a range of services delivered on-site, including computer access, after-school programs, and community-building activities.

programs, some of which also occur on-site and include youth summer and after-school activities, financial literacy training, technology instruction, and more.

So if you are looking for the optimism that once defined America, you may just find it at 801 Alma, where, with just a little help, families work hard and thrive.

Often individuals experiencing homelessness are unaware that they are entitled to income. In the last few months, caseworkers have made it possible for **FIVE Opportunity Center drop-in clients to obtain their SSI/SSDI or GA benefits!**

Access to transportation can make all the difference for people trying to tap rehabilitative services, get or keep a job, or just find shelter from the weather. **Opportunity Center staff distributed 80 VTA passes last quarter!**

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to me.' But it was okay because at least it was a safe corner," she said.

Lydia suffers from chronic mental health issues, as well as ADHD, anxiety, and depression. She has also struggled with drug abuse. She remembers being "really happy" until she was four and her mother died; then her father and stepmother started beating her. When Lydia was eight, she was molested by a stranger and then blamed for the crime and sent to her room. As a teenager, she ran away from home and was raped, leading to decades of choosing abusive personal relationships.

Then four years ago, she decided to change her life. "I made a giant leap of faith; I thought, 'there's got to be a better place,'" she said.

Lydia went to the Opportunity Center, where the first thing she did was join the yoga group. She began working with Opportunity Center case managers Michael and Octavio. With their support, regular medical care from

the Opportunity Center's health clinic, and lots of yoga, acupuncture and therapy, she started creating a new picture of herself. She realized she had been a victim of domestic violence and abuse. "It's a developmental deficiency; I didn't know how to do these things," said Lydia. "Over and over again I would build these terrible relationships. Now I know why."

Lydia has finally gotten rid of most of the toxins in her life. Smoking is her biggest vice now, but she has a plan for stopping. She even saw a need and helped institute an improvement to program delivery at the Opportunity Center — the new "program track," which started in April to provide expectations and incentives to meet the needs of clients who are committed to changing their lives.

"I'm grateful this place is here. I'm happy; I've got clean socks, and food," said Lydia. "This place is an oasis for me."

\*client's name has been changed to protect her privacy

## Save Money and Trees

Our all-volunteer team works hard to help as many individuals and families with affordable homes and supportive services as possible. You can help us save printing and postage costs (and trees) by allowing us to email you; please visit <https://communityworkinggroup.org/keep-in-touch/> and sign up to receive future issues of *Thresholds* and other updates electronically!

**The nights are warmer for 250 Opportunity Center clients, thanks to donations of coats and jackets made possible through a partnership with One Warm Coat.**

**In the past three months, SEVEN Opportunity Service Center clients found a place to hang their hats, having recently transitioned into permanent supportive homes!**

"NO COMMUNITY HAS A BIGGER HEART"

## New CWG Board Member Is Optimistic About Tackling Homelessness

**W**hen Julie Lythcott-Haims, former Stanford University Dean of Freshmen, was invited to join the Community Working Group Board of Directors, she accepted immediately. "A man I deeply respect (CWG Board President John Barton) reached out to me and said 'I want to tell you about what we're doing about homelessness in our community,' and my eyes widened at the realization that there's this wonderful organization working in a behind-the-scenes role to try to address the fundamental needs of an overlooked portion of our population," says Lythcott-Haims.

**“***Most of us benefit from some degree of support, mentorship, assistance, encouragement in order to make our way in the world ... those who are homeless or at risk of homelessness are no less deserving than the rest of us in getting that kind of support.***”**

— Julie Lythcott-Haims

A former community organizer with Obama for America, Lythcott-Haims enjoys raising awareness and galvanizing support for causes she believes in. "In a community like Palo Alto, we often search for opportunities to do good work around the globe; we may overlook the fact that there are people in tremendous need right here in our backyard," she said. "There's the homeless population in Palo Alto, the visible side, people we see seeking money in the street — but there are many more we don't see who are so close to homelessness."

"I'm interested in every single one of us, regardless of background or circumstance, having the chance to live a meaningful life. Most of us benefit from some degree of support, mentorship, assistance, encouragement in order to make our way in the world. To me, those who are homeless or at risk of homelessness are no less deserving than the rest of us in getting that kind of support," said

Lythcott-Haims. "As an African-American woman, I know humans often view those unlike them as 'other.' When we can stop seeing the homeless as 'other' and realize that they are fellow humans who have come upon a challenging circumstance, I think we can better appreciate their struggle and perhaps feel compelled to provide support."

Lythcott-Haims, who moved to Palo Alto from the Midwest to attend Stanford in the 1980s, believes that the local community can meaningfully tackle the seemingly intractable problem of homelessness. "No community has a bigger heart than Palo Alto, and no one embodies a forward-looking, can-do spirit more than Palo Alto. If there's a problem, we put our minds together and are passionate about solving it. If there's an opportunity, we'll put our effort toward seeking and obtaining it. There's a belief and optimism about life and living, a sense of exuberance and joy, here. So I'm confident that when Palo Altans come to a better understanding of the extent that people are struggling with homelessness right here, they will be motivated to do all they can to address the problem."



New CWG Board Member Julie Lythcott-Haims is an author and former Stanford University dean.

**Last quarter, EIGHT Opportunity Service Center Clients took a giant step toward increased self-sufficiency, having landed new jobs!**

## Communities Conduct Homeless Count

**I**n late January, Palo Alto, Menlo Park and their sister cities all over the Bay Area spent two mornings counting the homeless individuals who live in our communities. This “point-in-time homeless census” is conducted every two years.

We await the counts, but the last census, in 2013, estimated that on an annual basis there were 7,151 homeless people in San Mateo County (a 6% increase over 2011) and 19,063 in Santa Clara County (an 8% increase over 2011). The homeless counts do not include persons who live in unconverted garages, storage sheds and bus stations, or who are temporarily staying with friends or family.

In 2013, job loss and the cost of housing were cited as the primary causes of homelessness. Now, with the economy improving, higher-wage workers are putting even greater demand on local housing stock, and rents are moving farther out of the reach of low-income individuals and families. According to a study released by the National Low Income Housing Coalition in March 2014, to afford a market-rate two-bedroom apartment



Affordable homes like those at CWG’s Alma Garden complex are in high demand in Palo Alto and surrounding cities in the Midpeninsula.

in San Mateo County, workers need to earn \$37.62 an hour (\$78,249 annually); in Santa Clara County, the rate is \$31.71 an hour. The situation in Palo Alto is even more extreme: according to the City of Palo Alto’s 2015-2023 Housing Element, low-income households in Palo Alto have almost no affordable housing options without substantial subsidies, and even moderate-income households have very limited housing options.

Currently, more than 325 people are on the waiting list for the 88 apartments and efficiencies at the Opportunity Center. In addition, every night 60 people sleep at the Project Hope shelter in East Palo Alto. The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development will release the official results of the 2015 Homeless Census in May.



2507-A Alma Street  
Palo Alto, CA 94301

[communityworkinggroup.org](http://communityworkinggroup.org)