



Enterprise®

# Lotus Living Tiny Homes

El Centro, Imperial County



## Introduction

The Lotus Living Tiny Homes in El Centro were among the first residences established under the Homekey program. The project was made possible through a partnership between the city of El Centro, Imperial Valley College (IVC), and the IVC Foundation. Working in partnership with leadership at IVC, the city of El Centro joined Homekey to develop temporary student housing for IVC students, many of whom experience housing insecurity, food insecurity, and other challenges. To make the project a reality, leadership at the city and college moved quickly to coordinate efforts across stakeholders, increase the college’s capabilities in supportive housing, and ultimately provide a lifeline of support to students in need.

**For more information,**  
**please visit:** [homekey.hcd.ca.gov](http://homekey.hcd.ca.gov)

SNAPSHOT	
<b>Project:</b>	Lotus Living Tiny Homes Project
<b>Project Team:</b>	City of El Centro and Imperial Valley College
<b>Location:</b>	City of El Centro, Imperial County
<b>Number of Doors Acquired:</b>	26
<b>Number of Units:</b>	26
<b>Number of People Housed*:</b>	19
<b>Target Population Served:</b>	Transition Age Youth
<b>Building Type:</b>	Manufactured Housing
<b>Occupancy Type:</b>	Permanent
<b>Total Homekey Award:</b>	\$2,600,000
<b>Philanthropic Award:</b>	\$524,114.00
<b>Total Cost Per Unit:</b>	\$100,000

\*As of June 2021



## Context

For an already vulnerable student population at IVC, the arrival of COVID-19 was devastating. With limited shelter beds, a significant population of youth in foster care, and a geographically isolated location, IVC had a significant need for youth housing prior to the pandemic's arrival – a need that continues today. The college identified vacant city-owned land for tiny houses and applied for local Homeless Emergency Aid Program (HEAP) funds, which they were unable to secure. However, the city informed them soon after that there was funding available from Homekey to support their efforts. The city had only three days to complete the application, but because the college had done prior groundwork to apply for HEAP funds, much of the necessary information was ready at hand. This paid off when the city's team quickly completed their application and secured Homekey funds.

## Successes

- **Rapid evolution from idea to reality.** Less than three months after the city filed their application for Homekey funding, an interdisciplinary team of city officials, technical experts, and IVC leadership turned the idea of siting tiny homes for students into a reality, ultimately culminating with 26 freestanding homes on an acre of land near IVC's campus.
- **The residences were a lifeline of support for the students they housed.** Magaly Scaia, an IVC student, former foster youth, and single mother, said that access to the home “not only ensured my academic success, but created a sense of community and safety for myself and my son.”<sup>1</sup>

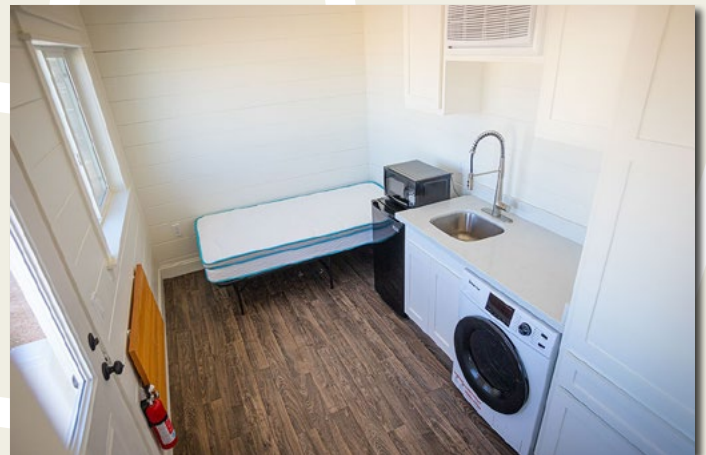
“We're really proud of the final project,” Dr. Martha Garcia, former CEO of IVC, shared in an interview. “It's much more amazing than I could have ever imagined and for me it's a very special place where our students will be able to not only call it home, but be proud of the community that they're going to be living in.”

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.westerncity.com/article/tiny-homes-el-centro-provide-housing-former-foster-youth-attending-local-college>



## Challenges

- **Construction costs increased unexpectedly.** Originally, the city applied for funding to support 13 duplex units. However, they learned from the vendor that duplexes would require additional International Building Code Review, which would have delayed the project. Instead, the city decided to develop 26 standalone units, but this increased installation costs by \$458,000, as each unit needed its own connection to utilities.
- **The city had to provide extensive guidance to their tiny home vendor.** Because tiny homes are a newer, innovative housing solution, El Centro's tiny home vendor did not have experience working with municipalities. El Centro officials found that it was critical to guide the vendor through the process and get them up to speed
- **Establishing supportive services for housing requires professional expertise that the college did not originally possess.** Most colleges in California are not experts in providing supportive housing, and at the outset of the Homekey project, IVC was no exception. The college has had to develop capabilities on the fly such as the ability to coordinate with property management, supportive housing services, and marketing professionals.
- **Some students did not have a clear understanding of the support services available to them.** When students began to move in, IVC administrators found that some students were not aware, or did not take full advantage, of support services right away. To address this, the college established a newsletter for residents of student housing with information on local long-term housing and employment opportunities, as well as workshops for residents to access support and establish a sense of community. Though not required, the IVC staff strongly encourages residents to utilize services and proactively communicates with them to increase attendance.



## Keys to Success

- **IVC secured buy-in for the project from elected officials and city staff early on.** Because IVC had already applied for HEAP funding, they had the general support of the city council and city manager for the project. That support made possible a tight turnaround when the opportunity to secure Homekey funding arose.
- **Due to the coronavirus pandemic, the city was able to move quickly.** State and local emergency declarations, issued in response to COVID-19, allowed city staff to perform an expedited procurement process, including direct contracting. Additionally, an exemption from the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) and land-use streamlining provisions created by the state legislature's passage of AB-83, freed the city from a lengthy review process and having to secure conditional use permits that normally would have been required.
- **Strong leadership with hands-on involvement at both the city of El Centro and IVC helped move the project along and ensure its success.** City officials emphasized that this project would not have been possible without the persistent efforts of their team. Similarly, IVC noted that the project was built on a longstanding effort by the former CEO of IVC, Dr. Martha Garcia, to provide housing and social services to students. Garcia promoted the effort among the IVC Foundation, city leaders and internal staff to provide student housing, and devoted a great deal of her time to writing grants and fundraising.



## What's Next

IVC's team is firmly committed to providing students with the supportive housing they need to pursue their education. With a 55-year master lease for the Lotus Living Tiny Homes, the college has made clear that it plans to fulfill this commitment over the long term. IVC also intends to keep the total rent and utility cost to \$200 per month, or 30% of the student's income, whichever is less, even though that will require additional fundraising by the college and IVC Foundation. At the time of interviewing, the college had recently established a relationship with a bank that is providing supportive funding, and Garcia was writing grants and fundraising in support of the tiny homes. In addition to fundraising, IVC's team hopes to establish a culture of commitment to holistic, supportive housing at the college.



THANK YOU TO OUR FUNDERS:



## About Homekey

Homekey is California's innovative program to purchase and rehabilitate hotels, motels, vacant apartment buildings, manufactured homes and other properties to convert into permanent homes for people experiencing or at risk of homelessness. Partnering with Gov. Gavin Newsom's office and the California Department of Housing and Community Development, Enterprise Community Partners helped deploy \$46 million in philanthropic funds in the first round of Homekey.

These funds, \$25 million from Kaiser Permanente, \$20 million from Blue Shield of California and \$1 million from the Chan Zuckerberg Initiative, provided additional operational and supportive services, and reinforced the pathway to safe, affordable and sustainable homes for California's most vulnerable. The grants leveraged Enterprise's expertise in providing technical assistance to help build the capacity of trusted housing and service providers.

## About Enterprise

Enterprise Community Partners is a national nonprofit that exists to make a good home possible for the millions of families without one. We support community development organizations on the ground, aggregate and invest capital for impact, advance housing policy at every level of government, and build and manage communities ourselves. Since 1982, we have invested \$44 billion and created 781,000 homes across all 50 states all to make home and community places of pride, power and belonging. Join us at [enterprisecommunity.org](https://www.enterprisecommunity.org).

## About HCD

The California Department of Housing and Community Development is dedicated to the preservation and expansion of safe and affordable housing, so more Californians have a place to call home. Our team works to ensure an adequate supply of housing for Californians and promotes the growth of strong communities through its leadership, policy and program development. For more information, please visit [www.hcd.ca.gov](https://www.hcd.ca.gov).