

## Independent Living Association

*Summarized by Thomas T. Thomas*

Recently introduced into Alameda County to impact housing stock, the [Independent Living Association](#) (ILA) works to develop and support privately owned or operated homes that provide shared housing for adults with disabilities. Tenants in these homes are able to live independently, are often on a fixed income, and do not need supervision or care from their landlord. Tenants may have external case management or other kinds of outside support.

The guest speakers at our January 27 meeting were ILA Program Manager **Francesca Barua** and Senior Manager **Sarah Swain**. They are both with [Community Health Improvement Partners](#) (CHIP) of San Diego, which started the ILA in that county, introduced it in Alameda County in 2017—with funding from [Alameda County Care Connect](#)—and more recently in Fresno County. There is interest in expanding the ILA program into Santa Clara, Riverside, and San Bernardino counties.

ILA supports home operators, their tenants, service providers, and the community. It works to provide quality, supported, and affordable housing for tenants, and objective and unbiased information for operators and the community. “Stable and safe housing is essential to recovery and the management of mental illness,” Barua said.

The speakers offered a key definition of the kind of housing ILA supports, formerly called “room and board”—and definitely not “board and care.” The difference is in the licensing requirements. Hospitals, long-term care and skilled nursing facilities (SNFs), and rehabilitation centers that provide medical care and support are licensed and regulated by the state. Single-occupancy residencies (SROs), apartment houses, and ILA homes are not licensed because their staffs do not provide such care. Tenants may receive medication support and help from outside suppliers such as In-Home Support Services (IHSS), but not from the housing staff itself. The ILA home may provide one to three meals a day, or offer cooking facilities for tenants to prepare their own meals.

ILA’s intentions and goals are modeled after those of the Better Business Bureau. That is, they certify the home operator’s business practices and provide a professional association for operators. They check out the operators and the home facilities, to make sure they have the right intentions and provide a quality living situation. And they partner with county and local government, law enforcement, consumer groups, and treatment providers to make these homes known in the community. But ILA is not a regulatory or licensing agency, cannot mandate that operators join, and cannot enforce its policies on non-ILA members.

For tenants, ILA offers a complaint process that includes documenting the grievance, exploring the situation, following up with suggested corrections as necessary, and suspending the home’s membership if corrections are not made.

For owners and operators, ILA membership is free and voluntary. Operators

attend a one-day course on ILA standards, submit an application form, supply copies of their rental agreement and house rules, and pass a home visit based on eight ILA quality standards. The standards cover a safe, well-maintained environment; clear resident policies; a grievance procedure; assurance of privacy; prevention of abuse and discrimination; a competent, owner-trained staff; clean amenities; and a focus on the tenants. Although most rooms are shared, the standards require a certain amount of personal space and no bunk beds. Bathrooms must meet the board-and-care standard of no more than six people to a single facility.

The value of membership for the operators includes business development opportunities, marketing, and support. The value for tenants is a resident screening process and maintenance of their legal rights.

The ILA organization is based on four pillars:

- **Education and training**—for operators, on business development and mental illness; for tenants, on their rights, how to thrive, and how to become part of the Peer Review and Accountability Team (PRAT) that evaluates such homes; for the community, on the importance of ILA standards and other community tools.
- **Peer Review**—through the PRAT team ensures operators meet quality standards. The review has an inside and outside checklist, and visits are made with 24-hour notice. ILA members get individual coaching, mentorship, and resources.
- **ILA Directory**—lists housing availability on the [ILA website](#) (which is mobile friendly). Each entry describes the house, amenities, rental amount, and has pictures.
- **Advocacy**—supports members, tenants, and the community. ILA explains what such housing is and is not. The organization monitors legislation and keeps members apprised of state and local laws.

ILA’s current membership in Alameda County includes 35 homes, run by 14 operators, and offers 222 beds. (In San Diego County the organization includes about 100 homes.) Rentals in Alameda County range from \$755 to \$1,000 per month for a shared room (comparably higher for a single) and average \$880. This amount pays for utilities, any meals provided, and on-site laundry. ILA homes have no requirements for a security deposit, criminal background check, credit check, or lengthy rental history. The directory is geared for immediate placement. Tenants may include adults with disabilities other than mental illness.

“Poor quality homes,” Barua said, “are usually in poor condition, have repeated calls for code violations, and are known as problem neighbors and subject to NIMBYism. High-quality homes have relatively stable tenant populations, trained owners, and provide an environment where occupants can volunteer, work part-time, and go to school.”

ILA in Alameda County trained 585 people in fiscal year 2019-20 and 68 more from July to December 2020. This included training in mental health issues, tenant screening, tenant rights, becoming an LGBT+ ally, and COVID-19 rules and cleaning procedures. Attendees gave these courses a 96% satisfaction rating. The

organization held 25 PRAT inspections in 2019-20, and 16 more in the last half of 2020.

You can email the speakers directly:

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  - Sarah Swain at [sswain@sdchip.org](mailto:sswain@sdchip.org);
  - CHIP Outreach Coordinator Crystal Warren at [cwarren@sdchip.org](mailto:cwarren@sdchip.org);
- or contact [Alameda@ilacalifornia.org](mailto:Alameda@ilacalifornia.org) to reach the local organization.

**Q. What kind of buy-in is ILA getting?**

The buy-in in Alameda County has been good. The community and the neighborhoods are getting better resources. The local service providers are getting an increase in the housing stock available to place their clients. And operators get education and tie-in to service providers. Some communities only refer clients to ILA-member homes.

**Q. Does ILA help provide properties to operators, such as under the California Land Trust?**

That has not been set up yet. ILA is looking for organizations and realtors that can support operators.

**Q. What are the drug and alcohol policies in ILA-member homes.**

It is addressed in the operator's house rules. Many don't allow drugs or alcohol inside the home. ILA suggests that the operator manage the behavior resulting from drug and alcohol abuse, rather than the substance itself. As to smoking, many require tenants to smoke outside or use smokeless substitutes inside.

**Q. How are vacancies in member homes listed?**

ILA sends operators weekly emails or phone calls, and posts their vacancies on the website. An SMS text project is being set up and will roll out soon.

**Q. What is the ILA policy on pest infestations, such as from recently homeless tenants?**

Operators are expected to have policies and practices to prevent pests. For example, they are expected to treat bedding between tenant occupancies for bedbugs. They can inspect the belongings of incoming tenants, and should be active in treating breakouts.

**Q. What mental health training do the home operators get?**

Currently, in Alameda County, the training is provided by the Mental Health Association of San Francisco. For example, they teach the signs and signals of an impending breakdown and the best ways to communicate and de-escalate a situation. Other training includes aspects of community service housing.

**Q. Are pets allowed in ILA homes?**

Some allow pets, not all. Of course, emotional support and other service animals are allowed.

**Q. Are we losing or gaining quality homes?**

Alameda County has gained 30 ILA-member homes in the past year. So the housing stock is growing. The organization has a partnership with service providers to facilitate this. ILA wants to work with home operators and help them become a member of the Independent Living Association.