



# Tiny Houses' Role in Addressing Homelessness

Based on the original article by Rebecca Coleman

ID: 07064

To support our organization internally as well help inform the general public and serve as a useful resource for interested parties, Homes 4 the Homeless is summarizing articles and research papers related to the homeless problem and proposed solutions.

Analysis and opinions expressed in this summary are that of the original author and do not necessarily reflect the attitude of Homes 4 the Homeless as a whole.

Summary prepared by:

**HARRISON FRIEDES**

H4H, Research Analyst

Summary reviewed by:

**J. MICHAEL LOGANBILL**

H4H, Vice President and COO

Summary issued on:

**OCTOBER 24, 2020**

# Tiny Houses' Role in Addressing Homelessness

## OVERVIEW

This [paper](#) examines the efficacy of tiny houses in addressing the homelessness crisis as it related to Alameda in 2018.

First the report provides background information on the tiny house movement and its role in addressing homelessness. Then it proceeds to examine the components of a successful village and common challenges by drawing on written resources and unique survey results from 11 tiny house village communities for the homeless.



One of the tiny home communities studied: Compassion First Village in Austin, TX

## THE HOUSING FIRST APPROACH

Tiny houses fall under the “Housing First” approach, which is considered to be the most effective method to ending chronic homelessness by the United States Interagency Council on Homelessness (USICH).

Housing First is based on the philosophy of providing housing to homeless individuals without mandating enrollment in or graduation of supportive services to qualify.

The USICH defines two methodologies within the Housing First approach:

- Permanent Supportive Housing (PSH): Provides long term rental assistance and supportive services targeted towards to individuals and families with chronic illnesses, disabilities, mental health issues, or substance use disorders who have experienced long-term or repeated homelessness. It provides long-term rental assistance and supportive services.
- Rapid Re-housing: For individuals and families living

on the streets or in emergency shelters. It provides short-term rental assistance and services. The goals are to help people obtain housing quickly, increase self-sufficiency, and remain housed.

The Housing First model emerged from a 1992 study conducted by New York University’s psychologist Sam Tsemberis as part of a group called Pathways to Housing.

The test provided apartments to 242 chronically homeless individuals. Each was provided with an apartment and the option of participating in services. After five years, 88 percent of individuals remained in their assigned apartments, and the cost of caring for them in their own homes was slightly lower than the cost would have been to care for them on the street.

Many different housing types fall under the Housing First model, tiny houses being one of them. Depending on their construction type and services offered, tiny houses can offer either Permanent Supportive Housing or Rapid Re-housing.

## TINY HOUSE NATION: A CONVERSE MOVEMENT

When thinking about the tiny house movement, it's important to make the distinction between downsizing, or the "Tiny House Nation", and upsizing, tiny house villages for the homeless.

The move for an ordinary citizens to downsize their living is often referred to as the Tiny House Nation movement. While understanding the details of this movement provides worthwhile context, one should also keep in mind that both the psychological and economical drives that inform this movement is very different from that of sheltering the homeless.

The Tiny House Nation movement began with Jay Shafer, profiled by The New Yorker in 2011 and described as a "brainy misfit". Shafer built his first tiny house in Iowa in 1999 and now owns his own tiny house building company.

Once commercialized, base prices for these homes tend to start around \$60k with many more customizable upgrades available. These houses are built on wheels or RVs, as these housing types are easier to acquire loans for and avoid standard housing codes.

Proponents of tiny houses for ordinary individuals cite financial and environmental reasons (along with a more general minimalist lifestyle.)

For instance, the International Residential Code (IRC) committee noted the following reasons in it's recommendation for code changes to help pave the way for tiny houses:

- While the average home size in the United States has increased 61% since 1973 to over 2600 square feet, the average household size has decreased, leading to a 91% increase in home square footage per inhabitant.
- Reducing building size is the "easiest way to lower energy consumption."
- The average cost to build a home in the United States is \$358,000 and has increased by roughly \$200,000 since 1998 whereas average annual income has remained flat for the last several years at roughly \$52,000. The cost of new construction for a 200-square foot tiny house can be as low as \$35,000. A typical down payment on an average-sized house is \$72,000, more than twice the full cost of a tiny house.
- National homeownership fell to 63.7% in 2015, the lowest level in two decades according to research from the Joint Center for Housing Studies (JCHS) at Harvard University.



Jay Shafer's \$5,000 tiny house.



Source: JCHS tabulations of US Census Bureau, Housing Vacancy Surveys.

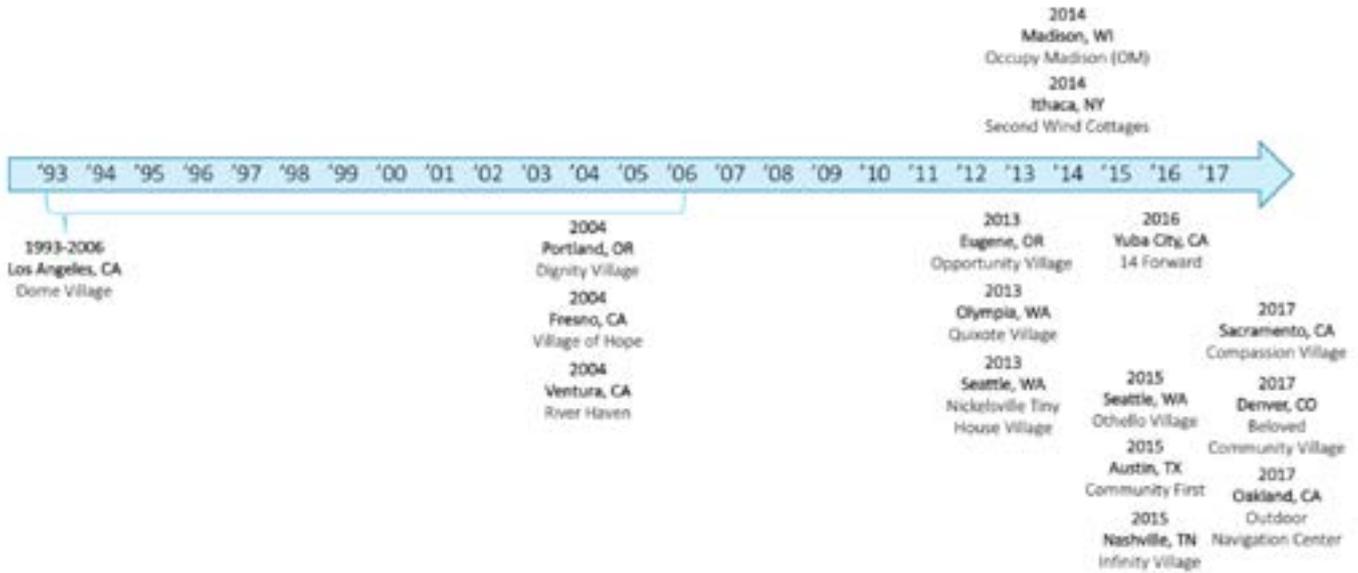
The "Tiny House Nation" movement can be considered a lifestyle as much as it is a financial decision.

This movement is supported in TV shows such as Tiny House Hunters, Tiny House Builders, Tiny House Nation, documentaries, meetup groups, blogs, and Instagram celebrities.

While both the Tiny House Nation and tiny house villages for the homeless are joined by the commonality of living in tiny homes, one is about the already housed downsizing into tiny houses for minimalist and environmentalist reasons. The other is about "upsizing" the homeless into more livable and stable conditions.

## TINY HOUSE VILLAGES: A HOMELESS SOLUTION

The tiny house for homeless movement is growing. At least 75% of tiny house villages in the U.S. were built in 2013 or later.



The above timeline shows the start dates and locations of some of the most prominent sanctioned tiny house villages for homeless individuals.

Andrew Heben, author of Tent City Urbanism, and someone who works at the forefront of the tiny house for the homeless movement, describes the key elements of the “village” model as follows:

### Heben’s Six Components of a Successful Village:

1. Tiny Houses	Individual units of 400 square feet or less
2. Common Buildings	Shared facilities and resources to supplement tiny houses. (Laundry, kitchen, showers, portable toilets).
3. Self-Governance	Involvement of residents in decision making and management.
4. Village Meeting	Residents meet as a community at least once a month.
5. Community Agreement	A basic code of conduct that all residents agree to abide by.
6. Non-Profit Sponsor	An entity that provides ongoing administration, oversight, and support.

Important to note is that while three of these six key elements are logistical (Tiny Houses, Common Building, Non-Profit Sponsor), three also revolve around the communal aspect of the village.

While these units are tiny (400 square feet or less), when these six components are followed residents are not made to feel isolated from one another, as the village is designed to foster a sense of community.

In addition to these key components, most villages also offer support services to residents, such as case management, access to dental and health care, workforce development, support groups, and transportation.

## SURVEY OF 11 TINY HOUSE VILLAGES

This paper surveyed 11 tiny house villages that serve homeless communities. Five in CA, two in OR, and one in NY, TX, WA, and WV respectively.

Eight of the villages indicated they provided transitional housing, while seven indicated they provide permanent housing (participants were allowed to select more than one option in response to this question).

In the 11 tiny house villages surveyed for this paper, residents undergo a selection and approval process, either through a coordinated entry process (qualifying under HUD’s definition of chronically homeless), application and intake process (can include a background check and medical questionnaire), and/or referral by agencies and community members.

Interestingly, of the 11 villages surveyed, seven indicated that they relied on sweat equity to build their units, with an average of 3,399 hours estimated or building all units in the village.

The cost to resident per month ranges from \$0-\$430, with seven villages indicating that residents are required to perform chores as part of living in the unit. Of those seven villages, seventeen hours of chores was the average per month (the minimum was 1 hour and the maximum was 40 hours).

Of the villages that provide transitional housing, below are the corresponding time limits:

Maximum Stay
No limit
No limit
84 days
2 years
2 years
2 years (officially - in practice that isn’t strictly enforced)

The 11 tiny house villages self-reported the level of difficulty they encountered for each step of the building process on a scale of 1 - 10.

How difficult was each step of the process of building your tiny house community?

Step in Process of Building Tiny house Village	Mean Response (0= no difficulty; 10 = extremely difficult)	# of Responses from Villages
Operational/Management	7.6	8
Governance	6.6	7
Permitting	6.6	7
Fundraising	5.8	9
Zoning	5.7	7
Constructing	4.4	8
Designing	4.3	7

## ZONING AND REGULATION IMPROVEMENTS

Below is a preliminary list of specific changes to local zoning, design, and permitting processes that would make it more efficient to build tiny houses for homeless individuals. These recommendations are drawn from case studies on efforts in Alameda County described earlier in the report.

- Adopt new emergency housing minimum standards (that were added as an appendix to the 2016 California Building Code and 2016 California Residential Code) to significantly reduce the barriers to building tiny houses for homeless people.
- California State Housing and Community Development (HCD) should consider developing and adopting building code standards that are unique to tiny houses rather than applying existing building standards to tiny houses.
- Emergency housing should be permitted in more zoning districts. In Alameda County, the General Ordinance Code currently allows for emergency housing only in the R-4 multiple residence district.
- Permit fees should be waived for groups that want to build tiny house villages, including: building, zoning, planning, inspection, and dumping fees. Costs associated with these fees can make a project with a relatively small budget cost prohibitive or are unduly disproportionate to the total budget. Parking, open space, and lot coverage requirements should be waived as well because many of these requirements do not apply to the scale of tiny house village developments.
- A manual showing best practices for tiny house implementation, including evaluation metrics, staffing, construction, and design, should be developed and implemented to make the process of building tiny houses more efficient.

## CONCLUSIONS SPECIFIC TO HOMES 4 THE HOMELESS

Homes 4 the Homeless is primarily focused on further developing the solution of modular housing to address the homeless crisis. Learning about the close cousin that is the tiny house can provide helpful information in moving us towards reaching that goal.

Learning the origins of the Housing First model along with its supporting data is helpful in further informing our approach to the rapid re-housing solution.

Data used to support the Tiny House Nation movement can also apply to that of modular housing for both downsizing and upsizing contexts. The 91% increase in home square footage per inhabitant is relevant to all of those affected by the housing crisis, the environmental benefits of smaller housing is a benefit to society regardless of the resident, and the increased cost of \$200k over the last 20 years is as relevant to the modular housing approach as it is to the tiny house one.



Homes 4 the Homeless modular housing prototype.

Every one of Heben's six key components to creating a successful tiny house village, most especially the communal ones, directly applies to creating a modular housing one, and is worth keeping in mind in both designing our villages and working with our partners in managing them.

The unique survey of the 11 tiny house villages for the homeless serves as a useful example of the type of input to request from our peers, along with the data itself being a productive reference point. The 11 villages rating Operations/Management as the highest difficulty level (7.6) is an important reminder to continue focusing on providing useful tools and resources in that area.