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# Fall 2017 First Prize Essay

## TINY HOUSES, BIG CHANGES FOR MANY

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You see people on city corners all the time, living in sleeping bags and under store awnings. Sometimes, you toss a few coins into their cup with heavy hearts and the hopes that they will ‘better themselves.’ What if there was more you could do for these people? As a citizen of your town, you have the unique opportunity to change the lives of the chronically homeless. Unfortunately, eradicating homelessness is a tricky situation our country has been dealing with for a long time, but tiny houses and tiny villages could be the cure for the cycle of chronic homelessness.

In Madison, Wisconsin, Betty Ybarra helped build her own 99 square foot tiny house “after surviving two long, cold Wisconsin winters on the streets” (Goldberg). Living in a tiny house was life changing for her as she was finally able to live with “shelter and security” (Goldberg), and she says she even happily “[checks] on her flowers [and can] now try to live a normal life” (Goldberg). For Betty, the tiny house movement gave her another shot at life, and can be a second chance for many other chronically homeless people around the United States.

In this essay, I will cover the definition of chronic homelessness and how a sense of community is more important than just building houses for these people. I will also discuss how tiny villages can be a successful alternative to other methods to ending homelessness because they promote a sense of community, are financially reasonable and are ultimately more sustainable than other methods. I will then touch on the concerns of people in the cities where tiny villages for the homeless have been implemented, and then give tips on how you can be a part of the movement towards a better life for the chronically homeless in your own city and the nation.

### **The Issue**

On any single night while you’re sitting at home with your family watching television, there are about 550,000 people on the streets in the United States. Not only is this number astronomical, but in 2016, there were around 77,000 homeless individuals who were considered chronically homeless, which is 14 percent of the total population of homeless individuals. People who are chronically homeless are those who typically have “complex and long-term health conditions such as mental illness, substance abuse disorders, physical disabilities, or other medical conditions” (Chronically). Due to this array of problems a person could be facing, it is difficult for him or her to find a steady job or a safe place to live. Nearly 70% of chronically homeless individuals live in unsafe situations, such as in cars, on the street, at parks, and many other unimaginable places. The chronic part of this homelessness comes from the fact that it is supremely difficult for these folks to find steady jobs. Even if they are lucky enough to be of the employed minority, they are living paycheck to paycheck with little money to pay the down payment on an apartment or home. This causes a cycle of issues for those who are chronically homeless, and this ever-growing cycle of homelessness is extremely hard to break out of for individuals and communities as a whole. The penal system adds to that cycle of homelessness. “Homeless people spend excessive time in jail or prison, often for petty offenses such as loitering” (State). A lot of the time, going to prison is a purposeful act that ameliorates the daily problems that they face. It is an emergency act as a way out of starvation

and cold for the chronically homeless. Although this is a quick fix for these people, it costs a lot more money than alternative efforts, as the annual average taxpayer cost is \$31,286 per inmate with the highest state being New York at \$60,000 per inmate (Santora). While it is an extremely expensive alternative to homelessness for the taxpayers, it is also a lot less restorative to the individual and the homelessness epidemic than the alternative cure to homelessness: tiny villages. Being in jail typically only causes a person to learn unsuccessful efforts like robbery, drugs, and violence, and once he or she is released, he or she is starting back where he or she came from.

### **The Answer**

The answer to curing homelessness does not necessarily mean building more homes, but rather building a sense of community for people who have been ostracized from their cities for so long. The main issue of the various ways that have been used to *temporarily* fix this dilemma of homelessness is that there is no change in the person's behavior when he or she transitions from the streets into a home. One society cannot "operate a problem (and definitely cannot do so cost effectively) if progress is not made on behavior goals" (Nahro). This behavioral progress could be seen through volunteer work, community participation, sharing, and following community rules. Although these things seem elementary to us, people who have been on the streets for many years have been in survival mode for so long and have lost many 'regular' social constructs that we all find easy. It is not hard for these people to go back to their old ways when there is no support behind them. Alan Graham, CEO of Austin-based Mobile Loaves & Fishes, agrees with this and "got the idea that [they] could lift a chronically homeless individual up off the streets into a gently used recreational vehicle." From this crazy idea came "an RV park on steroids," which supports many once-chronically-homeless people (Brooks). This was the beginning of Austin's tiny house village: *Community First!*

Tiny houses have been in the news lately, and their uses vary from retirement homes, houses-on-the-go, or a way of minimalistic living. These no-mortgage homes have been trending on HGTV, Travel Channel and all over YouTube as the next way to live. What hasn't been discussed as much is how great the tiny house movement could be for eradicating chronic homelessness in cities across the United States and the globe. This movement not only creates inexpensive homes, but also builds a sense of community for the homeless.

### **Tiny Villages – A Very Real Alternative**

Tiny Villages are little communities of miniature houses (100-400 square feet) which are typically just one bedroom and all other necessities are communal throughout the village. Tiny homes are a great alternative to other methods of dealing with the issue of homelessness because they are extraordinarily less expensive than other methods, create more of a community, focus on decreasing negative behavior, and finally, are more long-term and sustainable than many other methods.

Sustainability: Tiny villages are a very sustainable method because they break the cycle of chronic homelessness by decreasing the negative behavior of participants. Other methods used to decrease homelessness are "without goals and performance expectation, [and] over the long run, will suffer a loss of program integrity and support" (Nahro). This is a fact that housing authorities are aware of but have found it difficult to maintain integrity within a program before the tiny house movement. The goal of tiny villages is clear: to keep people off the streets, to teach them how to be self/community sustainable, and to better their lives from the inside out. Two programs that have succeeded in working with participants to decrease negative behavior are the *Bridge to Housing Program* and the *Medical Respite Model*. "Residents with point violations for breaking house rules and program requirements could 'earn their way back' by

doing volunteer work and participating in their own program” (Nahro). This allowed for a first step to recovery and sustainable stability as they were given an opportunity to better themselves in a safe and supportive environment. In other communities, tiny houses are used as interim housing to support people as they work to gain the financial and social footing to be able to move into more permanent rental housing. An 8-year pilot program in Utah, called *Housing First*, has reported a 74 percent success rate. In all of these tiny-home-situations, people are expected to get better and are supported by a community as they do so.

Community: Tiny homes create a sense of community by enforcing the act of sharing with each other, living together, and following community rules and regulations. Sharing is an important part of the community living because these people have not been used to accommodating to others, and the village allows them to learn these skills. In the *Community First!* village, “the residents share everything [from] the state of the art communal kitchens to laundry and bathroom facilities. There’s a dog park, volunteer nurses, a market, gardens, chickens and goats, a fish farm and an art gallery” (Brooks). As long as residents follow the only three rules: paying rent, obeying the law, and following the community rules, they are allowed to stay in the village. In other villages, they meet “twice a week in the evenings to discuss problems or concerns and to share a common meal that they take turns cooking” (Saez). Working together and being a part of a true community can help participants to become acclimated to the real world because they now have a place where they are accepted, heard, and given responsibility. This helps people because “where there’s stability and a home base, safety and normalcy, the mental health issues some people have are alleviated... It’s not cured but it’s easier to manage” (Frederico). This is an exciting push for a better life for these people as a result of such a solid feeling of community. “One of our residents has been homeless for about 25 years,” says Severn, the creator of *Quixote Village*. “He told me he’s excited to start a little rose garden. It really touched me to hear that,” she says (Saez). *That* is the better life these people are so grateful to have the opportunity to have.

Financially: Tiny houses are known across the world for being mortgage free and inexpensive. In a tiny village for the homeless, this situation is even more the case. The “cost per unit is one of the lowest and most flexible [homeless rehabilitation] models currently in use” (Nahro). While taxpayers are annually paying up to \$60,000 per inmate, tiny villages cost about \$5,000 per home and seldom use the government’s money. The typically fully functional tiny home with a bed, toilet, and tiny kitchen (Frederico) costs about \$5,000 and tiny house village *Occupy Madison* utilizes this and depends primarily on volunteer labor and community donations. Gregory Kloehn, a California artist, found an even cheaper way to build tiny homes. He has “singlehandedly build small portable homes using salvaged materials [for] less than \$100 each” (NBC). Although these are not a part of a true community, they are much less expensive than other alternatives and are practical as they are “strong and watertight” (Frederico). Any safe place for a person to live keeps him or her off the streets and out of jail, which is the main goal of the tiny house movement, therefore, even these super inexpensive ideas which are not a part of a village are indeed substantial alternatives.

### **The Concerns of the Area**

There are many concerns that people of the cities have as these communities are being created. Two concerns that have been raised are safety and property values. The main response to this is that “these people were already living in [the] community” says Konkel from *Occupy Madison Village* (Frederico). City governments also have issues with tiny houses like that of Rochester, New York and stalled the project of *Rochester Greenovation* with “a whole bunch of maybes” (Frederico). Thankfully, tiny villages have actually helped the towns they have been built in as they take people off of the streets and into jobs while keeping the tiny villages clean and tidy due to the strict village rules. The city of Austin is glad that the tiny village *Community First!* was implemented. Graham even has “neighbors that [he] runs into periodically through-

out the city that are going, ‘Thank God that you’re out here’” and he remarks that *Community First!* is “going to be an asset and far, far, far from a liability” (Brooks).

### **How to Help**

Tiny villages and homes are the best way to end homelessness in cities around the United States. Now it is time to discuss how you can help your community and the homeless people who live among you to live better lives off of the streets. There are a few things necessary from a community to make tiny villages possible. These things are engaged volunteers, fundraising efforts, and the political push for better laws about tiny homes for the homeless.

Engaged volunteers are necessary to a tiny village because homeless people do not often have access to resources such as lessons on how to cook and clean or medical resources. Volunteer nurses are in high demand in tiny villages so if you have a background in the medical field and are interested in donating some of your time, make sure to look into those opportunities. Also, volunteers to help with fundraising and educating the community are important because citizens are typically the most fearful of what they do not understand, so educating folks around your city on how tiny villages could help the city to thrive would be very beneficial to the overall acceptance of this new and exciting method to end homelessness.

Fundraising is important to a tiny village because these villages seldom receive any money from the government and money is necessary to the building and maintenance of tiny homes. The more money donated, the more tiny homes there are, and the more people can move into these homes for the homeless. Look into ways you can donate money or influence others to donate to the tiny village community in your city.

Finally, a push on the political sphere is important to the overall support of tiny homes and tiny villages for the homeless. Because “zoning prevents tiny houses from being considered livable based on square footage” it is hard to find a place to build these homes especially when the government isn’t backing the movement. Speaking to representatives can only help this situation as the more people in a community who back up such a beneficial movement, the more the government will consider allowing its implementation. Dialogue within the community is extremely vital when addressing the need for legal places for homeless people to safely live.

### **In Conclusion**

Tiny villages are the way to a safe, sustainable, and enriched living situation for people who have been homeless for so long. They keep people off of the streets for good by teaching them how to live as a part of society, the importance of following the rules, and staying involved with each other. They are less expensive than most other methods used to rid of homelessness and keep the city they are found in safer and cleaner than before. Most importantly, tiny villages and the tiny house movement as a whole give the once chronically homeless a secure place to live and a better way of life.

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