

## Issue Briefing: Sacred Communities/Micro Units Dwellings

HF1872/SF2471

### The short version

This bill would allow churches, synagogues, mosques and other places of worship to create sacred communities of tiny homes on their property for persons experiencing chronic homelessness. The bill would allow faith communities to use a model developed by the nonprofit [Settled](#) using research from the University of Minnesota. The model creates small sacred communities for these individuals alongside people intentionally choosing to leave their current housing. The dwellings are not fully plumbed, but full bathrooms, showers, laundry and kitchen are available in the common house. These communities of tiny homes require no government funding.

### The long version

Many discussions around homelessness focus on the policy of "housing first," stressing the importance of getting an individual a place to stay and then working on other issues. **The Settled model**, coming out of research from the University of Minnesota, recognizes that **these individuals have often experienced significant trauma and need healing; it is based on a community first model, inviting people into a loving, supportive community.** The residents are offered a permanent home – many for the first time - so long as they pay nominal rent and follow the rules set out in the “good neighbor” agreement.

**A key component of the model are volunteers called “intentional neighbors” - people choosing to moving out of their home or apartment to intentionally live in community with those who have been chronically homeless.**

Each of the micro units (tiny house) can be built on site at any faith community that wants to be part of the project and then moved to a church or other place of worship that is creating one of these settlements. However, this highlights a grey area a problem under current Minnesota law. Any vehicle on wheels is considered a recreational vehicle (RV) under Minnesota law and are not permitted as a permanent form of housing. As of now, the type of tiny homes used for Sacred Settlements would fall under the recreational vehicle category in statute. **This bill**

**clarifies that tiny homes can serve as permanent housing on congregational property.** It also **provides a set of building, sanitation, spacing, and setback standards** for faith communities interested in providing this type of housing to their unhoused neighbors.

These units have a dry or compostable toilet and a gravity fed water with a catch basin. They are constructed using the **same materials (including insulation) as residential housing.** We have worked with both the Department of Labor and Industry and the League of Minnesota Cities on building standards and issues of inspection.

The League of Minnesota Cities wants the bill to include an “opt out” provision, meaning that cities can decide whether their local church, synagogue or other place of worship may create these sacred communities – a municipal version of “not in my backyard.” This would be a great infringement on religious freedom; **faith communities must have the ability to move forward if they are called to do this work.**

The Star Tribune carried an excellent opinion piece on this model, written by Thomas Fisher, head of the School of Design, the University of Minnesota. You can read it here (October 16, 2021): [Tiny houses could aid homeless - StarTribune.com](#)

You can see a short story by WCCO TV showing the houses and introducing a missional here: [East Metro Collective Builds Tiny House Community For People Experiencing Homelessness – WCCO | CBS Minnesota \(cbslocal.com\)](#)

#### Key points

- Very few housing solutions provide options for those who experiencing chronic homelessness. This one does.
- This model is based on building community and has no government cost.
- Because of the history of trauma and mental health issues of many of the people in these sacred communities, they need a third or 40% of residents to be people coming from stability.
- Churches and other places of worship must be able to answer their call to help the homeless in whatever way they discern – the bill can’t include provisions in which a city can decide whether a faith community can move forward.
- We also need significant funds in a bonding bill for emergency shelter across Minnesota. 80 of Minnesota’s 87 counties lack adequate shelter beds.