

Tiny houses could aid homeless

Faith communities can and will help if governments will get out of the way.

By Thomas Fisher

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GLEN STUBBE, STAR TRIBUNE

A local nonprofit that believes tiny houses are the answer to the homeless crisis set up a model village in a Maplewood church parking lot, pictured here on Jan. 22.

There are today fewer people living on the streets of the Twin Cities, as local governments have used funds from the Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economic Security (CARES) Act to place many people in hotels and motels emptied during the pandemic.

While that strategy makes sense in the short term, it is financially unsustainable over the long term. Not only will CARES money eventually dry up and the demand for hotel rooms rise, but this remains one of the most expensive forms of emergency shelter imaginable.

Meanwhile, lower-cost and longer-term solutions to the challenge of homelessness continue to meet resistance within city and state governments, even among those who claim to want to solve this problem.

Settled, a local nonprofit organization that works with various faith groups to create "sacred settlements" for people experiencing homelessness, has encountered bureaucratic foot-dragging in the Twin Cities, which raises real concerns around the separation of church and state.

These sacred settlements will only be established on land owned by religious organizations, as with Mosaic Community Church in St. Paul, which hopes to host the first of these communities. Their settlement will consist of a small number of tiny homes built by

local congregations for people who have experienced homelessness and for "missionals," who choose to live in the community to provide support and friendship to its residents and to ensure that their needs are met.

The residents will have 24/7 access to the main worship building, which will function as a common house with toilets, showers, and shared kitchen and dining facilities. Residents will sign a housing agreement and all are welcome to live in the community as long as they pay rent and abide by the community guidelines, with work opportunities as an option to offset a portion of their lease.

This offers an alternative to the "housing-first" approach of most housing agencies, under which the focus is on getting people into a unit, whether it fits a person's needs or not. The use of CARES funding to place unsheltered people in hotel rooms is an example of this.

But many people living on the streets do not lack merely shelter; they also lack family or friends, apart from those who share their situation. Putting people into shelters or hotel rooms, separated from their community, can worsen their problems by further isolating them.

Settled instead takes a "community-first" approach, housing small groups of people who care about and for each other in clusters of tiny homes designed to fit into the neighborhoods around them. These sacred settlements are small enough that religious congregations can accommodate them on their land. And the tiny houses are simple enough to build that even the relatively unskilled labor of most worshipers can make a difference.

All of which makes the resistance of the public sector to this faith-based solution particularly troubling. Some regulators view the tiny homes as unsafe, even though they adhere to the same standards as those that regulate recreational vehicles. Others argue that these settlements threaten public health and safety, even though everyone has access to code-complying kitchen, toilets, laundries and showers.

Still others have said that cities cannot make exceptions to rules that prohibit tiny homes, even though local governments regularly grant exemptions, such as safe-lot programs for people who have no place else to live except in their vehicles.

The resistance of city staff also pits local governments against a federal law. The Religious Land Use and Institutionalized Persons Act (RLUIPA) prevents cities from using zoning or other policies to thwart efforts by religious organizations to pursue their missions. Housing people who have experienced homelessness fits well within the mission of faith communities and yet they have been repeatedly stymied by local bureaucrats, even as cities in other states have embraced tiny homes as a cost-effective and humane way to address homelessness.

In some cities, staff and elected officials are also not on the same page. St. Paul's Mayor Melvin Carter, for example, has argued that his city needs to "consider amendments to the zoning code to permit ... pocket neighborhoods and cottage communities." The mayor has also said that the city needs "to support alternative household types such as ... intentional communities and other shared living models," and "to encourage creativity in building design and site layout."

We Minnesotans like to think of ourselves as charitable and community-minded. But when it comes to helping those in our communities experiencing homelessness, we seem happy to embrace expensive, short-term solutions, while blocking low-risk, longer-term ones like Settled's sacred settlement.

Cities might be content to use CARES funds while they last, but if our cities really cared about their residents who are experiencing homelessness, they should embrace the willingness of our faith communities to address this problem — and get out of the way.

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