

# Rotary

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MAGAZINE

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## ENDING HOMELESSNESS

# Downsizing

*Can tiny homes be a bridge to stability and permanent housing?*

Inside a chilly warehouse, Terry Lee bends down to examine a wayward nail protruding from the side of a 2-by-6 floor joist that will soon support a tiny house. “We’ll probably need to pull that one out,” Lee says, consoling me, a volunteer who didn’t quite nail her first attempt at using a large nail gun. Lee smiles, grabs his hammer, and adds: “But that’s OK.”

The longtime Rotarian spends at least one day a week here at the Hope Factory in Seattle, walking around stacks of precut lumber and insulation as he helps volunteers like me build tiny houses for homeless people.

Outside of this use, tiny homes are best known as a movement, popularized in TV shows, that espouses minimalist living and lighter environmental footprints through small — typically under 400 square feet — dwellings, often with surprising touches of luxury. More recently, cities around the country are experimenting with tiny houses too, albeit without the frills, to see if they can provide a bridge to help people who’ve been living in tents or in their cars to get back on their feet and achieve the stability they need to find permanent housing.

The houses that I and other volunteers are building today are simple: 8 feet by 12 feet, with electricity hookups, lights, a heater, and an air conditioner. They don’t have plumbing, though each house will be moved to a tiny-house village with communal laundry, bathroom, and kitchen facilities, along

with case managers to help residents access health care and other social services.

“We’ve found that tiny homes are one of the most appealing options for people coming out of homelessness. On the street, they don’t trust anyone. Their stuff is constantly stolen. With a tiny home, you have privacy, a lock on the door. It’s much more stable, with easier access to social workers,” Lee says. “The villages also help establish community and build trust, and that’s what I see as the main advantage.” The villages are part of a housing-first approach that prioritizes getting people into temporary housing and then addressing underlying issues such as financial instability, trauma, mental health needs, or substance use. Critics say the approach can leave those issues untreated for too long, but proponents say the model supports a critical first step: stability.

“Our case managers are on-site and work with residents to connect them with health care, help with employment. But the most important thing is housing navigation — to provide individuals with a home address so they can apply for IDs, social benefits, jobs, and permanent housing,” says Sharon Lee, a Seattle Rotarian (no relation to Terry) and executive director of the Low Income Housing Institute, a nonprofit that builds and operates many of the tiny-house villages in and around the city.

The number of tiny-house villages in the U.S. has grown from 34 in 2019 to over 100 in 2024, according to a study in the *Journal of Housing and the Built Environment*.

To learn more and get involved, visit [liihousing.org/tinyhouses](https://liihousing.org/tinyhouses).



“These villages are not the answer on their own ... but they are a meaningful part of the solution.”

Terry Lee (right) guides a volunteer assembling a tiny home. Lee and the Rotary Club of Mercer Island have led local efforts to raise more than \$80,000 to build tiny houses.

They're located across the West Coast and are popping up in cities like Denver; St. Louis; Nashville, Tennessee; and Austin, Texas.

“These villages are not the answer on their own, and they should not replace long-term investments in affordable housing,” says Yetimoni Kpeebe, a doctoral student at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte who co-authored the study. “But they are a meaningful part of the solution for meeting immediate housing needs.”

Those needs are increasing. The unsheltered homeless population in the U.S. increased by nearly 60 percent between 2015 and 2024, according to federal data. The issue is especially pressing in Seattle and surrounding King County, which despite not cracking the 10 largest metro areas in the U.S. has

the nation's fourth-largest homeless population, behind New York, Los Angeles, and Chicago.

Experts say many factors such as poverty, mental illness, or drug use contribute, but the root cause is clear: a lack of affordable housing.

Rotary clubs are trying to help fill the gap. Terry Lee and fellow members in the Rotary Club of Mercer Island have led efforts by Seattle-area clubs to raise more than \$80,000 to help build tiny houses.

In upstate New York, Rotary clubs in Rochester and nearby Fairport have built tiny houses for homeless people. Fairport Rotarian Mark Fuebacher says with nearly 100 percent of his club participating, members quickly built two tiny houses during the pandemic after getting approval to redirect \$3,000 in club and district funding. The

project's construction manager, Ed Johnston, a Rotarian for 50-plus years who had worked as a carpenter, used his connections to get free or steeply discounted materials. “The whole community came together,” Fuebacher says. Johnston adds: “I've only seen two or three projects like this that everyone worked on together. It was just great to see.”

In Seattle, each tiny house built at the Hope Factory costs about \$4,500 thanks to volunteer labor and a discount on materials from a home improvement store. The operation is overseen by the nonprofit Sound Foundations NW, which builds as many as four tiny houses each week. Once the paint is dry, the houses are loaded onto flatbed trucks and handed over to the Low Income Housing Institute, or LIHI

(pronounced “lee-high”), which partners with local governments and donors to build villages.

“Most people stay six months or less, and we tend to move the families out quicker,” says Sharon Lee, who has led LIHI for more than 30 years and is a member of the Rotary Club of Seattle-International District. She says LIHI has built more than 20 tiny-home villages over the last decade and secured 89 buildings for affordable rental housing since 1991.

She says it’s not cheap to operate the villages but that they’re less expensive than other shelter models, such as converting old hotels into temporary housing. LIHI staff members are on site 24/7, and case

managers help the more than 2,000 people who come through the villages each year, she says.

Andrew Constantino had been living in a tent on the streets while recovering from a heroin addiction when he was offered a tiny house about a decade ago in what was then a Seattle experiment. LIHI wanted to quickly provide shelter for people living in tents, and the 96-square-foot tiny house was a way to abide by various building and zoning codes.

“I got a tiny house, oh my God, having just spent a winter in a tent. I was trying to work. My phone was frozen in ice. I had to shave. You spend most of your time figuring out where to shower, where to do laundry,” he says. “Having a bed to

sleep in, a lock on the door to keep my things safe, having heat in my home — I was overjoyed. You had to drag me out of there.”

Constantino says he spent a couple of years in the village before moving into permanent housing. Sober for 18 years, he now works as an outreach specialist for an organization that helps people struggling on the street.

“In large shelters, there isn’t any kind of community. People see each other as an inconvenience,” he says. “In a village, they see each other as a community; you make dinner for each other. That doesn’t show up in the data, but those intangibles make the villages special.”

— ERIN GARTNER

Volunteers, including from the Mercer Island club, build a tiny-house village in Seattle in 2018. Most residents are able to move to more permanent housing within six months.



BY THE NUMBERS

<400 sq. ft.

Size of a typical tiny home

100+

Tiny home villages in the U.S.

58%

Increase in U.S. unsheltered homeless population (2015-24)

Short takes

The world saw 44 confirmed cases of wild poliovirus (31 in Pakistan and 13 in Afghanistan) in 2025, a 56 percent decrease from 2024.



On 31 December, Rotary and the Institute for Economics and Peace successfully concluded a seven-year partnership that advanced Rotary’s commitment to Positive Peace.