

# Housing First policies could help end Pensacola homelessness

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(Photo: Gregg Pachkowski@gregg@pnj.com)

It feels like there is someone on every corner in Pensacola with a sign asking for food, asking for money or asking for help.

The sheer volume of solicitors on the streets seems, anecdotally at least, to increase every day. Still, panhandling is just one symptom of a larger, less visible problem.

At last count, there were approximately 800 homeless people in Escambia and Santa Rosa counties, often eking out existences in makeshift camps, public parks and vacant buildings.

One of those people, Helene Saetre-Balkhar, traveled down Palafox Street recently dressed in layers to ward off the February cold, lugging most of her belongings behind her in a well-worn rolling suitcase. She explained she and others on the street just want to live a life with dignity and the opportunity to do better.

"I'm washing in the river in the middle of the night," Saetre-Balkhar said, explaining it is prohibited to bathe in a public restroom. "I refuse to not be able to maintain hygiene. If I want to be glamorous and shave my legs,

I'm doing it by the light of the moon and whatever business signs are nearby."

Homelessness is not a new problem. And it is not a problem that's unique to this community. It is not, however, a problem that's impossible to solve.

There's no one catch-all solution for every community, and no one simple trick that will get everyone off the street. But there are different models across the nation with measurable results. There are success stories to emulate, unsuccessful initiatives to learn from and hard numbers that prove a community can reduce its homeless population if it is willing to put in the work.

As local homeless advocate Michael Kimberl succinctly puts it, "The best way to get rid of a homeless person is to put them in a house."

## Different housing models

Essentially, there are two models for addressing homelessness: housing ready and housing first.

Housing ready is an approach that suggests homeless folks need to overcome issues such as mental disorders, substance dependency and lack of job training before they move into long-term housing.

Housing first says the opposite. You get a person in a stable environment, then you tackle their underlying issues.

In recent years, housing first has become the go-to model. In fact, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development has championed the housing first model as a "policy priority" and used it as a measuring stick when disbursing some \$2 billion in grant funding each year to combat homelessness.

In 2010, former President Barack Obama's administration launched the Opening Doors initiative, the nation's first comprehensive strategy to prevent and end homelessness. Based on annual "point-in-time" counts, HUD estimated in 2016 that the nation experienced a 23 percent reduction among homeless families, a 47 percent drop in veteran homelessness and a 27 percent decline in individuals experiencing chronic homelessness.

Brian Sullivan, HUD supervisory public affairs specialist, said communities focused on ending homelessness through supportive housing typically had more success than communities that "managed" homelessness through short-term shelters and housing ready programs. Sullivan said the housing ready initiative places a series of "demands" on people — sobriety, mandatory counseling, etc. — with the expectation that once a person meets all the demands, they can "graduate" to self-sufficiency.

**Additional content:** [Women plan homeless shelter for female military veterans \(/story/news/2017/02/08/area-navy-veterans-creating-shelter-for-female-veterans-who-are-homeless/97611774/\)](https://www.pnj.com/story/news/2017/02/08/area-navy-veterans-creating-shelter-for-female-veterans-who-are-homeless/97611774/)

When the chronically homeless are placed in a high-demand environment, "They don't graduate. They don't succeed. They go back to the streets," Sullivan said.

The setbacks that lead to failure are myriad. It could be simply missing an appointment because of unreliable transportation. A person could slip back into substance dependency as a form of self-medication. Important paperwork could be lost, stolen or destroyed in the course of a rough-and-tumble life outdoors.

Either way, officials eventually reached a consensus that backwoods and spaces beneath bridges were less than ideal environments for self-improvement. As the U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness reports, "Everyone is 'housing ready,' meaning that sobriety, compliance in treatment or even a clean criminal history is not necessary to succeed in housing."

## Survival mode

Locally, the advocacy group Sean's Outpost launched a grassroots housing first initiative, Satoshi Forest, in 2013. The free camp currently houses 14 people who have arranged neat rows of tents in a wood clearing off Massachusetts Avenue.

Satoshi Forest was initially envisioned as a community of tiny houses where the homeless could find stability and start building a financial foundation for themselves, but the initiative has stalled amid pushback from surrounding homeowners concerned about safety and property values and county officials concerned about ordinances prohibiting temporary structures.

For all of the public battles, the camp itself is almost uniformly quiet and peaceful.

On a sunny March afternoon, Frank Laritz, a slim, cheerful 27-year-old who's been on the streets for four years, ate a meal at a makeshift table surrounded by tents and trees decorated with paintings, potted plants and handcrafted bird houses.

Speaking about the benefits of the camp, Laritz said, "You get to enjoy life a little bit without always being worried somebody is going to steal your stuff. I've been able to buy food in bulk, and I can have a stove without having to carry it around everywhere."

**Additional content:** [Appleyard: Assisting the homeless woven into Pensacola's history \(/story/news/neighborhoods/characters/2017/03/11/pensacola-appleyard-homelessness-recurring-issue/98978286/\)](#)

Sitting nearby, Russell Baker, 58, added, "You don't have to pay anything, so you can save your money. It gives you a chance to do what you have to."

Baker, a manufacturer by trade, severely damaged his shoulder when he was hit head-on by another driver. He also suffers from arthritis in his vertebrae. Unable to work, he lived with his son for a while, but didn't make the move when his son took another job out of state.

Baker expected to find a place of his own, but found it impossible to scrape together enough money for first month's rent, a security deposit, utilities and other initial costs.

"I'm trying to find low-income housing, but it's just not out there ... I'm hoping to get disability and pay back money I owe to family and friends," Baker said. "Once I pay back my debts, I'll try to get a place."

Kimberl, executive director of Sean's Outpost, said people underestimate how tough it is to actually live in homelessness.

One part camp supervisor, one part personal counselor, one part trail guide, Kimberl is respected and adored in Satoshi Forest for his willingness to get down in the trenches with his clients. He stops in at the camp several times a week to serve meals and check on residents. He answers his phone around the clock and helps with everything from navigating social services to pursuing passions like art and crafting.

He uses the phrase "boot straps" as an inside joke at the camp, a reference to the cliched admonishments that the homeless should just to pull themselves up by their boot straps and work their way to success through brow sweat and elbow grease.

At Sean's Outpost, most who can work, do. The residents of the camp often rise before the sun to walk or ride bikes, or in a few instances, drive to their shifts at fast-food restaurants and retail chains. Still a minimum wage job, even two jobs, isn't enough to get on stable financial ground.

That financial struggle comes on top of the inherent mental and physical strain of a life on the streets. It's life in a constant state of wariness, of weariness, of uncertainty, of fear, of hunger, of discomfort.

"You don't know who is going to rob you, or rape you, or when the cops are going to come along and wake you up and tell you to move along," Kimberl said of homeless people living in illegal camps.

"Your only focus is, 'How do I survive?' It almost becomes primal."

## Spending to save

Moral justifications aside, numerous studies by universities and municipalities have shown it's cheaper for a community to house a homeless person and give them support than it is for them to do nothing.

The logic is that homeless people, particularly the chronically homeless, are heavy users of expensive emergency services like jail cells, emergency rooms and ambulances. The costs vary by community, but studies uniformly show they're in the tens of thousands per person each year.

A 2014 study in Central Florida found the cost associated with jailing and treating 107 chronically homeless people was about \$31,000 a year per person. The study estimated it would cost about \$10,000 a year to put those same individuals in a permanent home with supportive case management.

**Additional content:** [Resource day provides help to homeless \(/story/news/2017/01/26/resource-day-provides-help-homeless/97000452/\)](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/energy-environment/wp/2017/01/26/resource-day-provides-help-homeless/97000452/)

A 2009 study in Maine tracked what the state spent on 99 individuals with a "major disability" in the Portland area by following them through one year on the street and two years in grant-funded supportive housing. The study found in the second year of supportive housing, Maine saved 46 percent in general health care costs, 35 percent in mental health care costs, 49 percent in emergency room costs, 87 percent in incarceration costs and 53 percent in ambulance transportation costs and reduced police contacts by 51 percent. All told, Maine saved about \$622,000 in the second year of supportive housing.

In 2013, Maine started a new initiative targeting the 262 "long-stayers" who spent more than half the year in an emergency shelter.

Cullen Ryan, executive director of Community Housing of Maine, said the state determined most of the area's homeless population moved in and out of homelessness quickly, but long-stayers were tying up the majority of shelter beds and draining resources with no positive results to show for it.

So, the community started ground-level efforts to place long-stayers in permanent homes with supportive case management.

"We agreed we're going to focus resources on this community," Ryan said. "We didn't get any money to make it happen. We concentrated the few rental subsidies we had and set (the long-stayers) as the priority."

The state required agencies that came into contact with the homeless to document the individuals' identities, specific circumstances and services received using software called the Homeless Management Information System. The HMIS allowed community housing to run detailed reports on groups and individuals, as well as quantify their service usage and program redundancies and gaps.

"Shelters used to just serve people in the shelters," Ryan said. "They'd give you a blanket, a place to sleep and some toiletries. Once you leave, I might see you again or you might not come back, I don't know. What we convinced homeless shelters to do is meet their clients externally. If you work in a shelter now, a lot of your job is to go out to the community and see how they're doing."

Service providers negotiated apartments for individuals one unit at a time, finding apartment listings and talking to landlords one-on-one.

"We'd say, 'I want you to take a risk with me because (this client) may not look good on paper, but I've got their back and it's like you're renting to me.' Relationships can bridge that gap. Once they get to know the service provider and the provider is being proven correct, you start to develop a list of places people can go ... . It's not in anyone's backyard, it's just people doing well in apartments."

Ryan reported that after starting with 262 clients in July 2013, the program had 87 people still awaiting housing as of the last official audit in July 2016. He estimated all those individual could be housed by the end of the year.

He said even with the case management and housing, the state was still saving \$9,000 to \$11,000 per person, per year. Equally important, 94 percent of the clients placed in homes had remained there with no significant issues.

"When you say 'you get to live here for the rest of your life,' you subtract all that stress," Ryan said, noting clients typically stopped self-medicating and showed less severe signs of mental illness. "We watch people get well right in front of our eyes."

## Come as you are

Saetre-Balkhar and her significant other, Scott Lee Voice, describe themselves as homeless and "normal."

Though originally from Canada, Saetre-Balkhar has lived in the U.S. for around 40 years. She said her landlord opted not to renew her lease one year, and she was unable to find affordable housing. The couple has been roaming since.

"The money we had accrued we had to spend to survive ... . You can't save anything. At the end of the month, we have \$25 left," she said.

The couple migrated from Illinois to Florida, and in this area came across an area street survival guide — a booklet that lists all the local agencies that assist the homeless. They said they called every agency in the booklet, then used a highlighter to circle organizations that would help them and a pen to cross out those that couldn't.

By the end of the 30-page booklet, the Xs outnumbered the Os a dozen to one.

The couple stated most assistance come with qualifiers, almost none of which they meet. They don't have drug or alcohol problems. They don't have mental health issues. They aren't veterans. They aren't married and they have no children, so they technically aren't a family.

They're just a man and woman who are down on their luck, and they have surprisingly few options for help.

"The public needs to know there are real, live American people with hearts of gold who try to do the right thing, who for whatever reason, aren't rewarded for it in any way," Saetre-Balkhar said.

Kimberl, who cites one of his roles at Satoshi Forest as keeping tabs on where grant money goes so he knows where to direct his residents, explained getting a client help can be like playing musical chairs.

"The qualifications are always changing, as well as who gets the grants," Kimberl said. "Providers don't want to give money to the same organizations every year, so every six months we're sending people to organizations then finding out, 'Oh, that's not where you send them any more.' We're almost playing chase the program."

Lately, there seems to be some political and social will to streamline the area's continuum of care for the homeless.

The EscaRosa Coalition on the Homeless is currently drafting a master plan to reduce the area's homeless population, and has partnered with other local agencies to make creating housing for local veterans a priority.

The Escambia County Board of County Commissioners held its first "homeless summit" in February, soliciting service providers to share their perspectives on where the continuum of care is now and where it needs to be.

Most service providers noted that better communication between agencies would be helpful, and some suggested the county's best function could be to provide uniform infrastructure for communication between agencies and distribution of services.

Pensacola City Councilman Gerald Wingate attended the homeless summit, and he has been one of the most vocal members of local government in terms of committing resources to reducing homelessness.

"As government leaders, our responsibility is to take care of people," he said. "There hasn't been a lot of emphasis on resources ... . We need to put funds together to build shelters for the homeless, that's the only way we can get them stabilized. We've got RESTORE (funding from the BP oil spill settlement), let's take some of that money for the homeless instead of infrastructure that doesn't really help people."

The city of Pensacola is currently weighing an ordinance that would ban panhandling in a stretch of downtown Palafox dubbed the Downtown Tourism District. Many officials stated they see homelessness and panhandling as separate issues, but opponents of the ordinance decry it as criminalization of homelessness.

Nathan Monk, a local human rights activist, said his hope was the local community would follow the lead of other areas with housing and services rather than enforcement and incarceration. He noted even in existing local services like shelters, there were barriers to access like prohibitions on pets and prescription medicine.

"We need to address what services we genuinely have and start being honest about what we aren't providing," Monk said. "Not in condemnation of the good services we have in this area, but to face it head on and deal with it."

He added it has already been proven that investing in housing costs about one-third less than doing nothing.

"You're spending that money now," Monk said. "(With housing first) you're choosing to spend less of it and do the right thing."

#### **Escambia and Santa Rosa counties homeless populations:**

**Total: 798**

**Males:** 547

**Females:** 251

**Disabling physical condition:** 157

**Disabling mental health condition:** 148

**Drug or alcohol addiction:** 161

**Sub-populations by percentage:**

**Veterans:** 14

**Children:** 16

**Families:** 8.6

**Un-accompanied youth:** 1.7

**Cause of homelessness by percentage**

**Employment/financial:** 47

**Housing forced relocation:** 8

**Medical/disabilities:** 18

**Family problems:** 22

**Natural disasters:** 5

*Source: 2016 Escarosa Coalition on the Homeless Point-In-Time-Count*

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