



LESSONS LEARNED FROM 20 TINY HOUSE VILLAGE

Presented by: Sharon Lee, Ralph Neis, and Gary Keister

MEET THE SPEAKERS



Sharon Lee, LIHI Executive Director

Sharon is the founding Executive Director of LIHI. Under Sharon's leadership, LIHI has developed more than 6,000 units of affordable housing in Washington state, including low-income and workforce housing, rental housing, and homeownership housing. Sharon is a national leader on solutions to homelessness including the creating of Tiny House Villages and shelters over 2,400 homeless people annually. Sharon was awarded an Honorary Doctorate of Humane Letters from Wilkes University for her work on ending homelessness.



Ralph Neis, LIHI Senior Director of Special Projects

During Ralph's 12 year tenure at LIHI, he has successfully overseen the development, acquisition, rehabilitation, and operation of numerous properties, tiny house villages and enhanced shelters. He manages complex project structures funded through various sources, including Low-Income Housing Tax Credits (LIHTC), Bonds, HUD, State and City funds, as well as other government and private funding sources.



Gary Keister, Bayside Housing Executive Director

Executive Director Gary Keister has served Bayside since its founding in 2014, steadily growing its property holdings and service capacity; implementing a trauma-informed model for serving homeless program participants in Jefferson County; building its board of directors; and leading its financial, operational, and strategic planning efforts. This work was preceded by many years of volunteering his leadership expertise to serve homeless housing organizations in Seattle and Jefferson County, Washington.

ABOUT LIHI

The Low Income Housing Institute (LIHI) was incorporated in 1991. We believe that innovative partnerships, creative project development and sustainable design features in affordable housing makes for healthy, strong, and resilient community.

LIHI develops, owns and operates housing for the benefit of low-income, singles, couples, families, seniors, veterans, homeless and formerly homeless people in Washington State and administers a range of supportive service programs to assist those we serve in maintaining stable housing and increasing their self-sufficiency.

We develop:

- Low-income Rental & Workforce Housing
- Permanent Supportive Housing (PSH)
- Homeownership Housing
- Tiny House Villages
- Enhanced Shelters by converting hotels
- Urban Rest Stops



LIHI PROGRAMS



Tiny House Villages & Shelters

LIHI currently operates 15 Tiny House Villages and 6 Enhanced Shelters in Seattle, Freeland, Tacoma, Lakewood, Lacey, and Tukwila. Salmon Bay Village in Seattle is an RV Safe Parking Lot with tiny houses.



Affordable Housing

LIHI owns and operates 3,700 affordable housing units across 82 properties throughout Seattle and the Puget Sound region. LIHI headquarters are based in Little Saigon China-International District at An Lac Apartments.



Urban Rest Stops

Urban Rest Stops are hygiene centers in Seattle's Downtown and Ballard neighborhoods that provide free access to restrooms, showers and laundry facilities to people experiencing homelessness.

THE PROBLEM

Washington has the third-largest homeless population in the nation, after California and New York.

The Unsheltered Point-in-Time (PIT) Count is required every other year by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) to effectively allocate federal funds to support regional efforts to end homelessness. It is widely understood to be an undercount.



King County Regional Homelessness Authority (KCRHA) conducted both an unsheltered and sheltered PIT Count in January 2024, along with the required Housing Inventory Count (HIC) of emergency shelter beds and certain types of housing units.

Washington has higher rates of unsheltered homelessness than most other states, except California. These are people living out in the elements, in greenbelts, in doorways and by the sides of roads. These are the worst places to be.

UNSANCTIONED ENCAMPMENTS

Unsanctioned tent encampments present a host of challenges to the communities:

Public Health Risks: lack of sanitation that can lead to biohazard risks and disease outbreaks, fire hazards, and blocked access for emergency responders.

Public Safety Concerns: higher rates of violence, theft, and drug activity in and around encampments.

Impact on Public Spaces: parks, sidewalks, and business areas become less accessible to the public. Public discontent over the encampments may make people avoid encampment locations, often urban cores can deter tourism and economic activity.

Legal Liability: cities may face lawsuits over injury or death in encampments on public property.





ENCAMPMENT REMOVAL WHACK-A-MOLE

In the past two years, Seattle has taken down more than 8,000 tents, removing encampments at a breakneck pace that shatters recent historical precedent.

These removals just scatter people from one neighborhood to another, essentially moving problems rather than resolving them.

Oftentimes, people are given just a few hours' notice to pack up all their belongings and move. If someone happens to be away working or running an errand when their tent or vehicle is swept, they could be out of luck.



Othello Village, Seattle

OUR SOLUTION: TINY HOUSE VILLAGES

In 2015, LIHI started building Tiny House Villages as a response to the homelessness crisis and as a replacement for tents. Tiny houses offer tremendous benefits over tents – they are safe, weatherproof and lockable – and the Tiny House Shelters allow program participants to reclaim their dignity and get on a path to permanent housing, employment and connection to supportive services.

TINY HOUSE VILLAGE PROGRAM



Our Communities

LIHI partners with neighbors, volunteers, community groups, non-profits, faith organizations, and schools that help support the villages with donations, meals, and volunteerism. Our villages shelter over 2,000 people annually.



The Tiny Houses

A tiny house is approximately 8' x 12', and materials cost about \$4,500. All tiny houses are safe, sturdy structures that help protect homeless singles, couples, families with children, and people with pets who are sleeping outside in unsafe conditions.



Amenities

Each house has electricity, overhead light, insulation, and a heater. Each village has a kitchen, bathrooms, laundry facilities, offices for 24/7 on-site staff and case managers, ample storage, and a security office.





THE CLIENTS

Referrals come from city agencies, outreach workers, non-profits, and faith sponsors. Clients agree to abide by a Code of Conduct.

Through our supportive services and housing resources, clients of the Tiny House Villages have experienced success in moving out of homelessness.

We have helped hundreds of program participants each year move into permanent housing and find employment. 65% of clients stay less than 6 months.

Villages serve populations that traditional shelters do not:

- Families
- Couples
- People living with disabilities
- Families with teenage sons
- LGBTQ+ families and couples
- Immigrant households
- Refugee households
- People with pets

CLIENT SERVICES

Through our supportive services and housing resources, program participants of the Tiny House shelters have experienced success in moving out of homelessness.

Tiny houses are meant to be a temporary bridge into permanent housing.

Case managers help clients:

- Obtain identification (drivers license, social security numbers, etc.)
- Connect with services such as health care, child care, education, and transportation
- We provide mental and behavioral health services, and substance abuse treatment through partnerships
- Teach financial literacy and how to budget
- Apply for government assistance
- Find employment
- Find and apply for permanent housing
- Reunite with family or friends





TINY HOUSE VILLAGES HISTORY

2013

Nickelsville, a self-managed tent encampment in Seattle, was looking for a new location. LIHI owned an empty lot at 20th & Jackson that was slated for development of affordable housing. The LIHI Board offered the site to Nickelsville to use for a year. Nickelsville camped in tents on our property. Nickelsville felt strongly that simple plywood sleeping sheds would be a vast improvement over tents and that they could be built cheaply; so a few of these were set up.

LIHI worked with Home Depot volunteers to build a few tiny houses for homeless veterans on the site. We didn't realize it at the time, but this was the genesis of our tiny house program. Nickelsville camped in tents on our property.

Lesson learned: Vacant land awaiting development makes for great sites for Tiny House Villages.





THE FIRST TINY HOUSE VILLAGE

2015

Lutheran Church of the Good Shepherd in Seattle's Central Area offered to host a tiny house village in partnership with LIHI and Nickelsville.

This is the first village with all tiny houses and no tents. The site had electricity, plumbed showers, bathrooms, laundry, and a kitchen. The village operated under the City of Seattle's Religious Encampment Ordinance but received no funding from the city. A small utility fee of \$90 per person was charged.

In 2022, the tiny house village site was developed into The Good Shepherd House, a seven-story, 86-unit building with 84 studio apartments providing permanent supportive housing for formerly homeless people.

Lesson learned: Faith - based organizations make for good Tiny House Village partners.



TINY HOUSE VILLAGE SITE MAPS

The City of Seattle allowed tiny houses under 120 square feet. They were initially considered “wood tents” for permitting. The 120 square feet is because the International Building Code considers anything larger a dwelling.



AFFORDABLE HOUSING BUILT ON TINY HOUSE VILLAGE SITES



Abbey Lincoln Court

6-story, 68-unit building providing affordable workforce housing. This building serves households earning 50% and 60% of the Area Median Income.



John Fox Place

7-story, 104-units of affordable workforce housing. This building serves families and individuals earning 30%, 50%, and 60% of the Area Median Income.



Good Shepherd House

7-story, 86-unit building providing permanent supportive housing for formerly homeless people.

AFFORDABLE HOUSING BUILT ON TINY HOUSE VILLAGE SITESCONTINUED



Nichols Court

6-story, 148-units of affordable workforce housing. This building serves families and individuals earning up to 50% and 60% of the Area Median Income.



125th & Aurora

7-story, 90-units of affordable housing serving seniors making 30 and 50% of the Area Median Income. Construction began in July 2025!

ENCAMPMENT LEGISLATION

Homelessness State of Emergency legislation passed in 2015 by City of Seattle allowed for non-faith-based encampments. Seattle also allocated funds for management of encampments.

Cities and counties can pass ordinances and zoning variances to permit villages and can partner with non-profit shelter and service providers to set up and manage villages.

Federal: RLUIPA – Religious Land Use and Institutionalized Persons Act: The land use-related provisions of the RLUIPA prohibit state and local governments from regulating land use in a manner that: discriminates against or among religious institutions, 42 U.S.C. ' 2000cc(b); or imposes a substantial burden on religious exercise, unless the regulation is the least restrictive means of serving a compelling government interest.

Washington State: ESHB 1956 – Authorizing religious organizations to host temporary encampments for homeless persons on property owned or controlled by a religious organization.



ENCAMPMENT LEGISLATION

City of Seattle



Seattle's 2015 encampment ordinance 124747, established a framework for "Transitional Encampments" as a permitted "interim use" for homeless individuals on certain public and private lands. The ordinance created a process for obtaining a Master Use Permit for these encampments, allowing them to operate legally for up to one year with a possible extension, and mandated an operations plan covering site management, services, and safety standards.

Director's Rules 20-2015 and HSD 01-2015: These rules provided guidance for implementing the transitional encampment provisions, detailing how operators should engage with communities and what operational standards to follow before and after establishing an encampment.

In 2020, the City Council passed ordinance 124747, which permitted and regulated temporary encampments and tiny house villages on public land, with the goal of providing interim housing for the unhoused population. The ordinance included provisions for public outreach, site plans, community engagement, and permit renewals, but also allowed for encampments on land controlled by religious or private organizations.

APPRENTICESHIP PROGRAMS

2016 - Present

Building tiny houses provides educational opportunities. Students build tiny houses as part of their curriculum and get the satisfaction of seeing their finished work put to charitable use.

Led by LIHI Board President, Melinda Nichols, she forged partnerships with numerous trade schools and other educational and tribal organizations that teach the building trades.

The Washington State Legislature funded programs with LIHI and Apprenticeship and Non-Traditional Employment of Women (ANEW) to have pre-apprenticeship, high schools, and vocational programs building tiny houses for people living unhoused.

Lesson learned: education and good work go hand in hand.







VOLUNTEER PROGRAM

2016 - Present

LHI's volunteer program provides an opportunity for community members to contribute their skills, expertise and unique talents to our programming. We invite all community members including LHI program participants, employees, board members and supporters, to help LHI achieve its mission.

The volunteer program creates strategic partnerships with educational institutions, corporations, private clubs, faith-based groups and individuals from the greater community.

Lessons learned: Host it and they will build. Volunteers become donors.

VOLUNTEER ENGAGEMENT OPPORTUNITIES



Business and Community Support

LIHI and Vulcan partnered with AGC and contractors to build 30 tiny houses in one day at the Lumen Field event center. At the end of the day, LIHI's construction team picked up the tiny houses and placed them at our True Hope Tiny House Village.



Work Parties

Volunteer teams are groups of co-workers, students, or other community members, who come together to do a one-day or multi-day volunteer project benefiting the low income communities.

VOLUNTEER ENGAGEMENT OPPORTUNITIES



Donate a Tiny House

Groups of volunteers (families, friends, neighbors, church groups, students, companies) gather to build and donate tiny homes to LIHI. These groups build houses in their own communities and the homes are picked up at the end of the build process.



Build Tiny Houses with LIHI

We have volunteer opportunities to help build houses at our tiny house warehouse, The Hope Factory. LIHI also partners with Sound Foundations Northwest who builds tiny homes at our warehouse using a gig system.



PARTNERSHIPS

Strategic partnerships create opportunities. LHL's partnerships are listed below:

Local Governments

- King, Pierce, Thurston, and Whatcom Counties
- Cities of Seattle, Tacoma, Tukwila, Olympia, and Bellingham

Government Agencies

- WA Dept of Commerce: Rights of Way and Encampment Resolution Program
- Washington State Department of Labor and Industries

Faith - Based Organizations

- Tabernacle Missionary Baptist Church
- Lutheran Church of the Good Shepherd
- True Vine of Holiness Missionary Baptist Church
- First Christian Church of Tacoma
- New Hope Missionary Baptist Church
- Riverton Park United Methodist Church
- Miracle Temple Church of God in Christ
- The Spirit Christ Church
- Seattle Word of God
- Church by the Side of the Road

Native American Tribes and Organizations

- Tulalip Tribes
- Puyallup Tribes of Indians
- Chief Seattle Club

Apprenticeship and Educational Programs

- Seattle Central College – Wood Technology Center
- Tulalip Tribes TERO Program
- Sawhorse Revolution
- Seattle Vocational Institute
- Apprenticeship & Non-Traditional Employment for Women
- Love-To
- Youth-Build
- Rebuilding Together
- Carpenters-Employers Apprenticeship & Training of Washington & Idaho
- WA Dept of Corrections
- Renton Technical College
- Many more



TINY HOUSE VILLAGE AND SHELTER EXPANSION

2020 - Present

As of 2025, LIHI has 15 villages in operation in Seattle, Tacoma, Tukwila, and Skyway. We have 6 converted hotels that serve as enhanced shelters. We piloted the RV Safe Lot program.

With our experience, LIHI is able to implement and standardize best practices. With improved performance came increased trust from municipal funders and increased interest from other cities, which led to significant growth in the Tiny House Village Program.

LIHI serves as a builder and advisor for other cities and organizations locally and across the country. This Tiny House Village model has spread across the county, particularly the West Coast.



24/7 ENHANCED SHELTERS



Maureen Howard Place

The former Candlewood Suites in Lakewood has been converted to an enhanced shelter serving people experiencing homelessness in Pierce County, including singles, couples, and people with pets. The shelter includes 77 rooms for guests.



Maple Court

The former Days Inn in Lacey has been fully converted into an enhanced shelter that serves up to 115 people experiencing homelessness and living on state rights-of-ways in Thurston County. The shelter has 118 fully furnished rooms for residents and 6 rooms for staff and case management.



Oasis Inn

The Oasis Inn is a 128-room motel in Tacoma will be converted into an enhanced shelter. It will be converted into critically needed permanent supportive housing and medical respite beds for people experiencing homelessness in Tacoma and Pierce County. 23 units will be under the new Apple Health and Home Program. 30 units will be used for short-term medical respite.

24/7 ENHANCED SHELTERS&CONTINUED



Aspen Court

The former Tacoma Comfort Inn converted to an enhanced shelter that serves up to 120 people experiencing homelessness in Tacoma including individuals, couples, veterans, and people with pets.



Harbor Inn

The former Harbor Inn in Freeland will provide 11 permanent supportive housing units and 9 shelter units serving singles and couples. The 9 shelter units are also available to families with children.

SALMON BAY RV SAFE LOT & TINY HOUSE VILLAGE

Salmon Bay Village was Seattle's first RV Safe Lot that included tiny houses. The goal of the RV Safe Lot is to encourage vehicle residents to leave their unsafe vehicles and instead move into housing or temporarily into a tiny house while permanent housing is secured.

The RV Safe Lot program has been supported by Seattle Mayor Bruce Harrell who has been insistent on finding humane ways to remove unsafe and deteriorating RVs from city streets. LIHI contracted with UHeights Center's Vehicle Resident Outreach team in identifying RV dwellers to enroll in the RV Safe Lot program.

Therapeutic Health Services (THS), a certified behavioral health provider, offered onsite substance use disorder and mental health counseling at Salmon Bay Village.

Site lease ended in May, 2025. A new site owned by WSDOT has been identified.



OUR IMPACT- 2024 CITY OF SEATTLE STATISTICS

1,364

People served in 2024

Tiny Houses are a core component to the City of Seattle’s emergency shelter response system. The Unified Care Team makes the majority of referrals to LIHI villages.

48%

Moved Into Housing

The majority (40%) of clients secured permanent housing, and others secured transitional housing, assisted living, or other specialized housing.

1,966

Behavioral Health Engagements

Behavioral health professionals work onsite offering constant, multiple engagements for mental health and treatment services. Trust building is key.

150

Medically Assisted Treatments (MAT)

MAT is the scientifically proven model to address substance use disorders. MAT enrollments are concrete methods to break cycles of addiction.

56%

Black, Indigenous, & POC Served

Given racial disparities in the homeless population Tiny Houses are a crucial resource for BIPOC communities. Many sites provide culturally-specific services.

97.2%

Retain Their Housing

Once a client moves out of the village and is housed very few clients return to homelessness. This helps break the cycle of homelessness.

48%

Substance Use Disorder Present

Pairing shelter with SUD treatment provided by onsite behavioral health professionals is a proven model to enroll clients into treatment services.



THANK YOU!

For more information, visit lihihousing.org