



Asking the Right Questions about Tiny Houses

By Robert Pulster, Regional Coordinator

The tiny house movement has been in the news a lot recently for its perceived potential to quickly house individuals experiencing homelessness, particularly in communities where there is an extreme lack of affordable housing. Before communities embrace this approach, however, we believe that caution is warranted. Ending homelessness means making sure that people are in a permanent, home-like environment where they have the opportunity to build long-term community connections. Communities that are considering developing tiny homes as part of their systemic solution to homelessness must ensure that they are appropriate for achieving that goal.

Your exploration of the viability of tiny homes should be embedded in a comprehensive community planning process that includes a broad range of stakeholders, including [meaningful participation from people experiencing or exiting homelessness](#). As you do that work, here are some guiding questions:

Will the tiny homes you are considering provide a home-like environment and meet housing quality standards?

When community stakeholders talk about tiny houses, they are often referring to very different things. Some are fully self-contained units that comply with local building codes and have all the amenities you'd expect in a rental unit, including a full kitchen and bath. Others have shared amenities and lack utilities or may not even be permanent structures, but rather built on trailers or wheels. Communities that are considering an investment in tiny homes should understand the local and federal housing quality standards that apply to temporary and/or permanent residences.

Do tiny homes provide a living environment that a potential resident would choose?

People exiting homelessness, like all people, need and deserve a variety of housing choices in order to select the one that meets their need for safety, stability, and community. As part of your planning process, you should consult extensively with the populations that the tiny homes would serve in order to determine if the accommodations meet their needs. You should pay particular attention to how residents would be selected and why. Potential residents may decline housing if the tiny home community is perceived as a homelessness development that faces being ostracized and separated from the broader community. You must also consider what other housing resources you will have available for people who decide that a tiny home is not for them.

What role will tiny homes play within your systemic efforts to end homelessness?

An effective community response to homelessness must be built on a coordinated system of temporary and permanent housing opportunities, including emergency shelter, bridge housing, rapid re-housing, and supportive housing, among others. The role of tiny homes in this system must be clearly defined, along with measureable performance outcomes related to housing placement and stability. While tiny homes might be appropriate for short-term emergency or bridge housing, you might find that they are not suitable for permanent housing.

Are tiny home developments the best use of financial and land resources?

Although they have a smaller footprint than single-family homes, tiny homes may not use land as efficiently as multi-unit residential buildings. This is especially important in areas where land is costly. In order to get the most from scarce resources, it is important to closely examine the economics of tiny houses, particularly the square-footage costs and the total number of housing opportunities created, as compared to affordable multi-unit apartments or supportive housing developments. Your resources should be invested in the range of options that will most effectively decrease and end homelessness over time.

How will the tiny homes be appropriately integrated into the community?

Any tiny house development, and particularly those offered to people experiencing chronic homelessness, should reflect home and community-based living standards laid out by the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services. The development should be integrated in and support full access of individuals to the greater community, including opportunities to seek employment and work in competitive integrated settings, engage in community life, control personal resources, and receive services in the community. It should optimize individual initiative, autonomy, and independence in making life choices, including but not limited to, daily activities, physical environment, and with whom to interact.

And finally, a community must have a clearly defined plan to decommission and dismantle a tiny home community if it is built with the intention of offering a time-limited response to a crisis. Otherwise, it may continue to divert resources from more permanent solutions.

Additional Resources:

[People with Lived Experience Must Be Meaningful Partners in Ending Homelessness](#)

[Using Shelter Strategically to End Homelessness](#)