

# A HOME OF THEIR OWN

A Guide To Building  
A Tiny Homes Community



BetterStreet

Tony D'Amato Stortz



## **Better Street**

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For Ron, Nadine, and the whole team at A Better Tent City: The first ones through the wall.

"The first guy through the wall — he always gets bloody. Always."

— from the 2011 movie, Moneyball.

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# Author's Note

This guide is an introduction to the complexities and nuances of operating a tiny homes community for people experiencing homelessness. Hopefully it offers some insights into the many challenges and opportunities that you will face as you launch this project and help to make whatever aspect of it you are undertaking to become a little more manageable.

The first ingredient that is essential to any successful tiny homes project is a deep understanding of why you are doing it.

Every volunteer, staff member, supporter, and resident has reasons for doing what they do. We do it because we love our neighbours, housed or unhoused. We do it because, in a country as prosperous as Canada, no one should be sleeping at risk outdoors. We do it because we have family or loved ones who have experienced homelessness. Maybe we do it because we've been there ourselves.

Regardless of why you got involved, this work is daunting, challenging, beautiful, and nuanced. It highlights the very best and the very worst of the human experience. It brings you to places you never thought you'd see, and introduces you to people that you never thought you'd meet. It is a great adventure and lots of fun, if you let it be.

Ending homelessness will be the work of a lifetime – maybe of many lifetimes. There are no shortcuts or silver bullets. It is a huge task that will take dedication, curiosity, patience, love, and a willingness to think differently. It will be a long journey, but the people you will meet and places you will see will make it all worthwhile.

I hope this guide can be a map for the beginning of your journey.

Good luck!

Tony

# About the Author



Tony D'Amato Stortz is the founder of BetterStreet, which offers strategies, problem-solving, and training for groups helping those who experience homelessness, drug addiction, and mental health problems. BetterStreet endorses and assists sanctioned 'tiny home' communities for these vulnerable individuals.

Tony worked for a year as Site Superintendent for A Better Tent City in Kitchener, Ontario., one of the tiny home communities in Canada.

In Kitchener, Tony used his construction experience, business training, and people skills to achieve many goals, including: helping to build the heated cabins residents would live in; planning and executing two moves of the entire community; managing two Covid outbreaks; and bridging gaps between the professional and street worlds.

He is currently advising the Hamilton Alliance for Tiny Shelters in Hamilton, Ontario. as it sets up 10 to 20 individual cabins where residents can live independently in a supportive community.

Tony has a B.A. in Commerce from the University of Guelph. He has extensive government experience at the provincial and municipal level, in outreach work (as Outreach Coordinator for St. Mary's Catholic Church in Kitchener), and in launching new programs. He helped launch and operate Tiny Home Takeout, a church-based initiative in Kitchener that gives away freshly cooked meals to everyone, from elected officials to people in poverty, and is supported by donations and volunteer work.





# A Home Of Their Own

Tony D'Amato Stortz



## Introduction

No guide can tell you everything there is to know about starting up and operating a tiny homes community for the homeless.

That's because the roots, symptoms, and experiences of homelessness are diverse. There are as many reasons for being homeless as there are people who experience homelessness, and no single silver-bullet solution for this problem exists.

But there may be another way.

Since 2020, A Better Tent City (ABTC) in Kitchener-Waterloo has been successfully housing 50 individuals, who otherwise do not fit into the shelter system. They have done this by combining a tiny home community with wrap-around support from faith groups, healthcare agencies, volunteers, and municipal partners.

The purpose of this guide is to provide a blueprint for any community, municipality, or organization that wants to alleviate homelessness by building tiny homes. It covers the core principles to launch successfully, plans to successfully design the infrastructure, and some of the logistical challenges that such an initiative will face.

# **1. Forming the Organization**

# Forming the Organization

This first step in making one of these tiny homes communities a reality is building a core team who will support the project. This can happen one of two ways: either through a grassroots community effort or with the support of a municipality.

## 1.1. Organizational Models

### Grassroots / Community-led

A grassroots community will be formed by activists, volunteers, and community leaders working independently of the municipality or other established service providers. Organizing this tiny homes solution as a grassroots community effort has distinct advantages and challenges.

#### Advantages:

- Innovative model
- Flexibility
- Speed of action and reaction
- Collaborative partnerships
- Entrepreneurial lens
- Responsiveness to residents' needs

#### Challenges:

- Securing a location
- Establishing credibility
- Fundraising
- Stabilizing / formalizing the organizational structure (e.g. incorporating, seeking charitable status, etc.)

When this project is a grassroots community-led initiative, you have the maximum amount of freedom paired with the maximum amount of work to do.

The unique benefit of this model is the ability to design the project to fit the needs of the residents and embrace the realities of their lives in all facets of the program. While this is more challenging from an organizational standpoint, it allows for deeper relationships, better models of support, and more inclusive wraparound programming.

# Forming the Organization

## Municipality

Embarking on this project as / through a municipality involves a very different set of advantages and challenges.

### Advantages:

- Better prospects for securing land/ location
- Access to funding
- Ability to hire / reassign existing staff
- Working alongside council for necessary zoning changes and other support
- Established credibility

### Challenges:

- Bound by corporate policies
- Less flexibility to design the program around residents' needs
- Less volunteer / partnership support
- Less ability to act quickly on harm reduction and client-centred strategies

With the municipal backing, the logistical and resource challenges are far easier to overcome. A municipality-led program will have access to land, staff salaries, credibility, and a closer relationship with city staff and council.

That said, it will also be encumbered. Much of the success of this project relies on the trust of the residents and the flexibility of the organizers. Any successful project will have to maintain an understanding of the reality of street life and be able to work alongside residents within that.

## Hybrid

The ideal organizational model for this project is an independent team / entity with municipal support as it harnesses the best of both. It is able to retain the independence and client focus of a grassroots organization and benefit from some of the resources of the municipality. Within this model, the municipal government can remain at arm's length, but assist the project with land, grant funding, and zoning issues<sup>1</sup>.

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1. All three of these (land, funding, and zoning issues) will be discussed at length later in this guide.

## A Home Of Their Own

This guide will assume the project is moving forward with independence, either with the grassroots model or the hybrid model.

### 1.2. Evolution of the Organization

If you decide to proceed with a grassroots or community-led model, its development will have some predictable phases. They are as follows:

Loose Collective > Working Group > Incorporated Not-For-Profit > Registered Charity

**Loose Collective:** This will be the early phase of the project. At this point it will be more conceptual and you as an organizer can reach out to like-minded potential supporters and partners (individuals, other groups, and organizations) to see if they are interested in getting involved and how. This is a good time to recruit for key roles and identify some essential resources to strengthen both the start-up and future of the project.<sup>2</sup>

**Working Group:** Once your team is pulled together, it's time to get down to some practical realities: looking at site selection, getting letters of support from partner organizations, securing funding, building volunteer teams, and creating relationships with contractors.

This phase is helpful for discerning who is committed to the project and reliably ready and available to put in the work versus who may have the passion but not the staying power.

**Not-For-Profit:** While the working group may be functional for a while, soon it will be necessary to incorporate. Incorporation establishes the project as a legal entity of its own, which provides some protection for the team members and credibility for attracting and retaining supporters, donors, and partners.

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2. It may seem tempting here to go it alone. This is a bad idea. The quantity of work, connections to be made, skills required, and sheer hours that this project will demand is beyond the capacity of any one person. Build a team that hits as many boxes as possible with as few people as possible. It will pay dividends in the long run.

## Forming the Organization

Within this process, some or all of the team members will become board members. This gives them some influence, but also formalizes responsibility for the project.<sup>3</sup>

**Registered Charity:** When the organizational structure has developed and stabilized, it will want to seriously pursue becoming a registered charity. This will allow the corporation, led by its board, to better manage and plan for its financial health, e.g. improved tax treatment, receiving donations and issuing tax receipts on its own.

The burden of this step is the regulatory compliance and high standards that a charity is held to. That is why, during the vulnerable start-up phase and before becoming a registered charity, it is so essential to find a committed charitable partner that can assist in overcoming the administrative barriers to fundraising.

### 1.3. Key Roles: "The Champions"

Getting this project off the ground will require several different skill sets. All seven of these skills below will be pivotal at some point in the start-up. These are the "Champion Roles". While one person may bring more than one role to the table, it is important that your project is supported by these "champions".<sup>4</sup>

#### Political Experience

To get going, the project will need an individual who is familiar with the elected officials, senior staff, and policymakers in your area. They can be in politics themselves, a former politician, a journalist, an activist, or any other

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3. It is important here to remember that the function of the board is to evaluate the performance of the organization and keep it on track. The board members may also be active on the working group, but when they are in their board capacity they should step back, look at the project as a whole, and make decisions in that light. Thanks to Marion Thomson Howell, an expert in organizational structures who assisted the project in Kitchener, for this advice.

4. While all seven may not be required for every project, all of these topics will come up. A weakness in one area can be offset by strengths in others and not every strength needs to be represented on your board. That said, it would be wise to seek out these talents among your supporters if possible. They will all be needed at some point in the process.

## A Home Of Their Own

profession that has brought them in contact with multiple levels of government. No tiny homes community will exist or succeed for long without the explicit or implicit support of its municipal government. Someone with this focused experience is the key to networking, getting the meetings, starting the conversations, and dealing with barriers so that the project can get that support.

### **Business Experience**

Another essential champion is someone well connected in the business community.

Such a project is expensive and, absent a large grant from the government, fundraising will be critical to its short and long term success. While small donations are very important, large institutional donations (cash or in-kind) can save the project hundreds of thousands of dollars. Having a team member who is well respected in the business community can help bring these donations in.

Secondly, the business champion is often able to reframe the narrative for more conservative councillors and politicians. Homelessness is more than a social problem, it is also an economic one. Telling the story of tiny homes through that lens with the support of the business community can grow your coalition of support on council and beyond.

### **Faith Experience**

Every major faith has some sort of call to care for the poor and vulnerable. Because of this, faith groups can be strong allies in making the case for tiny homes. This work is often at the core of their mission and many have the volunteers, funding, and sometimes even land to back it up. Having a champion who is associated with a major faith group in your area is key to unlocking this potential and translating the intentions of the faithful into action for those who need it most.

One note of caution here: while faith groups are key partners and strong allies, proselytizing is not a dimension of this project and is neither expected



## Forming the Organization

nor recommended. The resident-staff / volunteer relationship has an inherent power imbalance and a resident may feel pressured to accept the religious teachings in order to keep their home. That is not in line with the dignity and autonomy that this project seeks to build.

### **Building, Zoning, and Municipal Experience**

Working with the municipality is a two-step process. Council is one part, but it is likely that your project will spend far more time working with municipal staff. A tiny home project will interact with staff at many levels, including building code, zoning, fire, social services, and more. These departments will have special requirements, expectations, and different ways of seeing the world.

Having a champion on your team who understands these subject areas and can work with staff is tremendously valuable. You will have to find and cultivate allies among municipal staff, work alongside them in your property search, and support them in making recommendations and submitting reports to council. A good relationship here goes a long way.

### **Social Services Experience**

Outside the halls of government, your community likely has a whole network of social service agencies that currently work to support people experiencing homelessness, addictions, and mental health issues. These organizations have often been around for decades and focus on a certain subset of the issues surrounding homelessness.

Having a champion on your team who understands this ecosystem of service providers can help you find your niche and foster allies without stepping on any toes or creating enemies. This person should be familiar with different local agencies, how they interact, and who runs them. A little goodwill and understanding upfront can help a lot here.

### **Construction Experience**

Once the approvals come in, the fundraising is in place, and the community

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partnerships are mobilized, the time comes for you to get the project built.

Your construction champion should be familiar with this process, working with subcontractors, preparing the site (e.g. making any necessary calls / arrangements) and more. They don't have to be the ones doing the work, but they will likely end up managing the work that is done.

### Frontline Street Experience

One more key capability is an individual with frontline street experience. All the conversations with planners, politicians, business owners and construction managers will mean nothing if the final project does not work for the people it aims to support, the future residents of the tiny homes.

Involving people with lived experience is essential at the beginning and throughout the project to make sure the team does not (even inadvertently) apply the "middle class lens" and ends up with something that is neither functional nor relatable for the residents. This champion will have a deep understanding, appreciation and love for people experiencing homelessness and will make sure they stay represented throughout the process<sup>5</sup>.

## 1.4. Charitable Partners

An essential pillar for the success of a grassroots effort is a charitable partner.

This partner is a registered charity that is prepared to and will accept and manage donations on behalf of the project before it is able to do so itself, e.g. issue tax receipts, hold the funds, and provide the donation portal that donors will move through. These partners are key to early traction and stability: providing credible and practical support for the money side of the start-up

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5. There is a quote I love here from a social service provider: "Our goal is to be effective, not to be efficient." There are some times when the needs of the people on the street will be challenging and threaten the efficiency of the project. In those moments, it is important to remember that no amount of efficiency matters if it's not effective.

## Forming the Organization

and allowing your team to focus on the real work of housing people as soon as possible.

### **1.5. The Middle Class Lens**

The middle class lens is one issue organizers, advocates and officials should always be watchful about when doing this work. It is the set of preconceived notions, values, and expectations that one brings (even inadvertently) into this work as a person who has no experience of homelessness or street culture.

One place where the middle class lens can show up is in the setting of the project's goals and success markers.

People who see the world through this lens may think that the residents need to get an apartment, a job, and stop using drugs for this project to be considered a success. While that is an excellent goal, it is a narrow one, and many individuals experiencing homelessness have such deep trauma and mental health issues that none of that is in play for them right now.

They may instead want to focus on being reunited with their children, learning to live in a community again, or start methadone treatment to help ease their addictions. All these goals help to re-stabilize someone and will eventually contribute to their healing. To measure their success and the success of the program by an arbitrary benchmark that doesn't take into account the realities of the street experience will set the individuals and the project up to fail.

A second way this middle class lens can be deceptive is in the reporting of violence on site. Victims of violence may take extensive steps to cover for the person who did it to them. They may pretend it didn't happen, make excuses, or even lie to protect them. This can be frustrating and confusing for the site manager who is looking for justice, but it's also a challenge to drop the middle class lens. Once you realize that there is a hidden power structure on site and the victim could be subjected to far more violence for speaking out, the victim's actions can begin to make more sense.

These are only two small examples, but this lens is present in almost all

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ways that a housed person, however sincere their intentions may be, interacts with the street community. It is crucially important to be aware of this lens and be thoughtful about how it could distort your thinking. Otherwise, this bias can lead to disconnected "success" markers, bad decisions, and a project that doesn't work for the most important group, the residents.

# **2. Consulting People on the Street**

## Consulting People on the Street

The core of any tiny homes community is always the people who live there. Because of this, no community can succeed without the insight, experiences, and guidance of the residents. To ensure their voices are included from the beginning, your team will benefit from directly consulting with people who have that lived experience.

This consultation can stretch from informal individual conversations to a formalized interview process with dozens of respondents. At the core, however, must be the acknowledgement that it is very difficult for a person who is housed, not struggling with addiction, and free from 'street life' to ever fully understand the world of the street. There are undetectable currents and cultures that profoundly shape the lives of the residents.

Still, if you ask the right questions and listen carefully to the answers, the people who you hope to serve can help you avoid your worst mistakes.

### 2.1. Asking Good Questions

#### What are the Core Things You Want to Learn?

This project, no matter where it is being launched, will have several core goals about what to learn from the people living on the street. These could be about the ideal location, rules on site, enforcement of rules, eviction policies, or anything else. This is also an opportunity to go to some key municipal supporters and ask what they would like to know to put them more at ease about the project.

#### Here are some potential questions:

- Would you be interested in a place like this?
- Where in the city would you like it to be?
- If you lived here, who would you want as a neighbour - why?
- What is your income source?
- Would you be willing to pay a program fee equal to the shelter portion of

## Consulting People on the Street

your social assistance?

- Would you do volunteer work on site?
- Would you do paid work on site?
- Which services would be the most important to you?
- What rules would help the tiny homes community work well for all the residents?
- What should happen when someone destroys property? (e.g. intentional vandalism of a shared space such as the kitchen)
- How should evictions be decided?
- What should happen when someone breaks the rules?

### What is the Most Effective Way to Ask Questions?

Be direct, yet always respectful. Avoid long, complex, or compound questions whenever possible. Speak plainly and use street language<sup>6</sup> whenever possible.

## 2.2. Getting Good Answers

### Include an explanation of the program with photos or videos

Respondents may not be familiar with the concept of the tiny homes communities, so it helps to be ready to show a quick video<sup>7</sup> about the project and/or some photos. However, it's important to balance explaining the project with ensuring you aren't leading the answers one way or another.

### Ask the questions verbally

Some respondents may not have strong reading skills. Still, their input is just as important. Having a conversation can make this information collection inclusive without forcing respondents to disclose any literacy issues.

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6. Like any subculture, this community has its own terminology and jargon.

7. Here is a video about A Better Tent City: <https://vimeo.com/486941338>

### **Record the interviews or take extensive notes (or both)**

Respondents will vary from very quiet to very talkative. Be prepared to record their input (with their permission) as well as the ability to write down notes as they are speaking. Later you can combine your notes with their direct words to get the most from each interview.

### **Combine open-ended and closed-ended questions**

Also, to get the most out of these interactions, use a mix of both open questions (e.g. "Describe your ideal neighbour, and allowing the respondents to choose the direction of their answers) and closed questions (that invite a clear yes/no or rating something on a scale).

There are benefits to each:

Open questions allow for the respondent's own nuance and detail. They provide a platform for respondents to share their truth with you and the answers often go in a direction that you may not have expected. They are also great sources for quotes that speak directly about the project and residents' needs. A good example of an open-ended question is: "What do you think would help a site like this work? What could go wrong on a site like this?"

Closed questions make for easy data recovery and can provide hard statistics for a report. They can also be repeated later in the process to gauge a possible change over time. A good example of a closed-ended question is: 'On a scale of 1-5, how important is having Wifi?'

### **Keep it anonymous**

It is important that the people you interview feel comfortable providing the most honest and straightforward answers possible. Assuring respondents upfront that their input will be kept anonymous and that their answers will not be used to determine later eligibility to live at the site will encourage their candour.



## Consulting People on the Street

This is especially true when asking about possible pitfalls a site may face, drug use, criminal activities, or other stigmatized behaviours.

### Get consent

A lot of this input will be sensitive, especially considering how vulnerable this population is. Very early in any interview, be clear about what the information will be used for and ensure they consent to that use, along with being recorded if you plan to do that. This is so important that it is best to include them in the standard interview script as well as in the summary of all the input at the end.<sup>8</sup>

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8. If you are providing compensation for doing the survey, it is good practice to offer it to people, even if they declined to continue once you shared the eventual destination of the information. Withholding compensation from someone experiencing this level of extreme poverty can be considered coercion.



# **3. Site Selection**

# Site Selection

Site selection is a key element in launching this project. There will be a variety of political and operational challenges your team will face. You may even find that allies and even peers can become skeptical when the prospective site gets near their own homes.

There are three main categories of potential sites.

## 3.1. Three Types of Sites

### Satellite Site

One option is a satellite site: a location that has an existing building with full municipal services that the project can use.

It is called a satellite site because the individual tiny homes serve as satellites around the main building. Washrooms, kitchen access, internet, and hydro connection<sup>9</sup> can all be run off this central building. An example of this would be a commercial building or restaurant with a large parking lot. The homes could be in the parking lot and the interior of the building could be repurposed for offices, common spaces, and/or renovated for kitchens, bathrooms, and other services for the residents.

### Serviced Site

Another option is a serviced site: a plot of land with no central building but with easy access to electricity, water, and sewage.

Over the short-term, this site can operate with just the existing electricity and rely on all other services being brought in or contracted out. Long-term though, a utility building will have to be installed where cooking, laundry, showers, and common space are available for residents, staff and volunteers.

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9. More hydro may be required than the building currently has.

## Site Selection

The capital investment required to upgrade a serviced site is only worthwhile if the project is able to justify the investment by staying there for a significant amount of time (2+ years).

### Greenfield Site

The most challenging option is a greenfield site: an area with little or no existing services. Electricity, water and sewage would have to be brought in, potentially with wells dug, septic systems or blackwater tanks installed, and new power lines run.

This option is only feasible with the security of a long-term lease (7+ years) or outright land ownership.

## 3.2. Other Site Considerations

**No matter the site, there are other specifications to consider, for example:**

- Flat ground: Any site should be relatively flat. Even a minor amount of grade change on site makes placing and stabilizing homes difficult. Significant groundwork would be required to remedy this.
- Drainage : Visit your prospective site during a rainstorm. Anywhere that water pools on site will make it difficult locate a home. These areas will be marshes in the summer and filled with ice in the winter.
- Gas and Water Lines: Presence of gas and water lines on a site will significantly reduce the amount of space you have to work with. Regulations typically require any inhabited structure be set back a prescribed distance from such lines.<sup>10</sup>
- Paved Site Access: Certain utilities (dumpster tipping, porta-potty servicing, food bank deliveries) will require a truck to get close to amenities that require servicing. Having an adequate amount of paved space on a site will help make that happen.
- Home Spacing: There will be a minimum space required, whether regulated or not, between each tiny home. Ensure your site is big enough to

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10. These are great places to put walkways on your site.

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accommodate this.

- **Lighting:** If your site is rural or in a dark area, additional nighttime lighting may be required. Include this in conversations with the electrical contractor when you discuss site servicing.
- **Emergency Access:** The diverse needs of this community means that fire, police, and ambulance may be required on site frequently. Build a site plan where they are easily able to navigate to and around the tiny homes, as necessary.
- **Green Space:** While paved surfaces are required, having a non-paved area for gardens, trees, and outside use is also vitally important.
- **Site Location:** Some areas of the city will be preferred by the residents.<sup>11</sup>

### 3.3. Site Location

The decision around where in the city to locate this project will be one of the first major challenges your team will face. These issues are highly political, vary from city to city, and will be influenced by your consultations with supporters and partners, neighbours, and especially the prospective residents.

Because of that customization, site location is outside the scope of this guide. If you would like more information, visit [www.betterstreet.ca](http://www.betterstreet.ca) to schedule a free call to help with the site search.

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11. This is a good question to include in the consultations with people with lived experience.

**4.**  
**Wraparound Agency**  
**Support**

## Wraparound Agency Support

### 4.1. Harm Reduction

Harm reduction is the idea that the harms associated with a behaviour can be mitigated, even if the core behaviour persists. It is often associated with addiction and drug use, but can be extended to other behaviours on the street.

Within the realm of addiction, harm-reduction strategies acknowledge that, while the addiction is the core of the behaviour, there are many “harms” associated with addiction that do not involve the substance itself.

For example, contracting blood-borne illness from sharing drug paraphernalia, engaging in crime or sex work to supply the substance, and incarceration are all harms related to addiction, but are not a direct result of the drug use itself. It follows that a harm-reduction strategy would try to mitigate the risks of blood-borne illnesses by providing free, accessible drug supplies. It would endeavour to remove the need to commit crimes or do sex work by providing safer supply. It would reduce the risks of incarceration by decriminalizing possession of the substance. If all these efforts were applied, the person may still live with that addiction, but they would be healthier, less traumatized, and less likely to be incarcerated. Fewer crimes would be committed and fewer preventable deaths would occur.

Beyond drug use, there are other ways harm reduction can be undertaken. The whole tiny homes project could be seen as a harm-reduction strategy. To make it possible for someone who is “sleeping rough” on the streets or in a tent to move into a tiny home does not solve all their problems, but it does reduce harms. If the harm of being on the street is the risk of dying from exposure, a heated home reduces that. If being robbed is a risk of living in a tent, a solid door and lock reduces that harm. If the insecurity and disruption of being constantly told to “move along” is a harm, having an approved site where one is welcomed reduces that harm.

At the core of the harm reduction mindset is humility. Harm reduction



## Wraparound Agency Support

acknowledges that there are some issues (addiction, trauma, chronic homelessness) that we are unable or unwilling to solve right now and, although it is not the ultimate solution, it can make life better for the person in the moment and keep them safe for another day.

### 4.2. Healthcare

Healthcare — either through its presence or its absence — will be a constant concern in any tiny homes community. From COPD to Crohn's disease to chronic pain, there are many maladies facing the street population that call for medical supports.

Your team can gain valuable insights as well as a potential partner by reaching out to a local healthcare agency that specializes in "street" healthcare. Providing such medical care on site and/or access to an appropriate clinic/agency can help lower barriers to healthcare<sup>12</sup> and improve the lives of the residents.

At the very least, it makes sense to have basic first-aid supplies on hand so residents can clean cuts, apply bandages, and take over-the-counter pain medication if need be. These supplies may disappear quickly, but having them available — either with a volunteer or designated resident — is nevertheless a step in the right direction.

If a healthcare problem is serious enough to warrant a hospital visit, you may find a lot of pushback from the resident. Too often, residents are treated terribly in the hospital. Bumping up against prejudice and discrimination, they can be denied painkillers because of their addictions, assaulted by security, and stripped of their belongings. Many would risk complications from any ailment rather than go near a hospital.

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12. The idea of lowering the barriers to healthcare is a crucial one to understand in this population. While a housed individual is able to take medications at regular times, wash wounds, change their clothes, and is treated with respect and dignity by the medical system, someone who is unsheltered may not. Even more basic could be having a phone to call for an appointment, knowing what day it is to go, and having transportation to get there. Tiny home communities help alleviate some of these issues.

### **4.3. Street Outreach**

Street outreach is crucial for filling the gaps in systems that people experiencing homelessness constantly face and can struggle to navigate. Street outreach workers help these individuals get to appointments, job interviews, and access other support services in their lives. Some outreach workers are based out of existing facilities (soup kitchens, shelters, etc.), but increasingly street outreach is going mobile, with workers going into the community to where the people are.

Residents will likely need and benefit from this type of support at the site. It can be particularly effective to involve both on-site staff (either hired or contracted for this) and mobile outreach services that serve people sleeping rough. That combination provides access to a variety of skills and personalities to better match with the residents and their needs. This diversity is another great reason to connect with existing local outreach agencies as you prepare for and proceed with your launch.

# **5.**

# **Municipal Approval**

## Municipal Approval

### 5.1. Building Code Exemptions

In the experience of establishing A Better Tent City in Kitchener, any building under 10 square metres (108 sq. ft.) did not require a building permit. This exempted the tiny homes' construction from many requirements of the city's building department.<sup>13</sup>

However, common spaces may be regarded differently. Unless an existing building already ties in to municipal services (water and sewer), it is likely that your site will have to comply with building regulations for the common spaces.

An alternative option for common spaces is to use a mobile structure like an RV or mobile home. Because these are on wheels<sup>14</sup>, they typically fall under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Transportation and not the city's building and zoning regulations. This can make a mobile option easier to deploy on a site.

### 5.2. Navigating the Zoning Bylaw

Regardless of the size of the various structures, your project will likely come up against the zoning classification of your site and issues with the zoning bylaw. Before proceeding, such issues will have to be addressed.

There are three core ways to respond to this:

#### Non-Enforcement of the Zoning Bylaw

One option is the municipal council may instruct staff to not enforce the zoning bylaw for this project. As much as council acknowledges that the project

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13. The plans included in this guide are under this size.

14. These must be roadworthy vehicles to qualify under MTO. You cannot just put wheels on a shipping container and claim it as a vehicle.

## **Municipal Approval**

does not comply, they also note that it serves an important social purpose and therefore can exist with the implicit support of the municipality.

The downside of pursuing non-enforcement of the zoning bylaw is that you cannot put in a structure that requires a building permit. This limits the square footage of your structures, does not allow any building on site to be connected to plumbing, etc. depending on your particular municipality's regulations.

## **Temporary Occupancy Permit**

If council is hesitant about not enforcing its own bylaws, your project could pursue a temporary occupancy permit. Receiving a temporary occupancy permit will allow for a time-limited use of the site in contravention of the zoning bylaw. While it must be issued for a fixed amount of time (24 months is a reasonable target).

The benefit of the temporary occupancy permit is that it provides an option to council that allows your site to contravene the zoning bylaw without council having to ignore their own rules. It also recognizes the project as a time-limited endeavour which can ease neighbourhood concerns.

The downside of using a temporary occupancy permit: as with non-enforcement of the zoning bylaw, you cannot put in a structure that requires a building permit, severely limiting your options on-site.

## **Public Use Provision**

The most robust exemption council might offer to your project is a public-use provision. These take advantage of a provision in a zoning bylaw allowing municipal projects to be exempted from zoning requirements if the project is providing a vital service on behalf of the city.

The benefits of this solution: it's not time-limited like the temporary occupancy permit, does not force the city to ignore its own rules like the non-enforcement of the zoning bylaw, and it allows your project to apply for building permits on the land.

## A Home Of Their Own

You do not need to be a city-run project to receive this, but it will likely increase the influence that the city has on your project.

The fact that these kinds of communities have been successfully established elsewhere (Kitchener, London, Halifax, Vancouver, Victoria, etc.) points to the capacity of municipalities to work around the zoning bylaw, especially for a temporary and urgent crisis like unsheltered homelessness.

### **5.3. Waiving Municipal Servicing Requirements**

Your municipality may also require that any buildings, regardless of size, are connected to municipal servicing. It may be necessary to apply to Council or city staff for a waiver or relief from such requirements.

### **5.4. Fire Regulations**

While their small size may exempt the tiny homes from requiring a building permit, the risk of fire still needs to be addressed. Coordinate with your local fire department independently to ensure the project meets the necessary guidelines (see the full section on fire readiness later in this guide).

### **5.5. Connecting to Electrical**

Once the site's selection and status is resolved, one of the first calls should be to your local electricity provider. Estimate the power draw your site requires to help their plans for and connecting of that amount of electricity to the homes.

Coordinate with your electrical contractor to begin this process as soon as possible. The logistics of connecting to the grid and the sourcing of electrical components to power the site can both have long lead times.

## **5.6. Trenching for Utilities**

If there are no existing services available to the tiny homes via a nearby building (satellite site model), it may be necessary to trench for water and sewer. This should all be accounted for in the site layout and completed before residents move in. Doing this work with residents on-site is challenging for the work crews and dangerous for the residents.





# **6.**

## **The Tiny Homes**

# The Tiny Homes

The tiny homes are the core of this project. They are the most visible symbols of the work and they are the piece of infrastructure that residents will interact with most. While no home will be perfect, there are some key design considerations that can improve the chances that these structures will serve both the residents and the project effectively and safely.

The homes will likely be framed with 2 x 4's on 16" centres in most spaces. The only exceptions to this will be that the lowest level of wood -- the part that is in contact with the ground -- should be pressure treated. This will ensure that the homes do not rot because of their contact with wet earth.

Another consideration with the framing is the structural integrity of the floor. There are two reasons for this: (1) the framing will have to allow a forklift to slide under the home and lift it, even if it weighs up to 10,000 lbs; and (2) the weight of the home could increase dramatically when some residents move in and that weight may not be evenly distributed. Note: even if the homes are not being moved, the floor should be solid so that the home does not warp and twist under the weight of its contents.

## 6.1. Drawings & Recommended Specifications

There are many different ways to build these tiny homes and you will have to work directly with your contractor to determine the best course of action for you. Based on A Better Tent City's experience, a full set of drawings is included at the end of this guide and recommended construction specifications provided below to help with your build.

## 6.2. Floors

- Raised off the ground to accommodate forklift forks
- PT plywood on the base
- Vapour barrier

## The Tiny Homes

- 5.5" cavity with insulation (2"x6" running the 10' length)
- Vapour barrier again
- Subfloor of non-PT plywood

### 6.3. Framing

- 16" on centre framing
- Batt Insulation (Roxul, fibreglass)
- Vapour barrier
- Boarded with 3/16" or 1/4" plywood
- All internal plywood treated with fire retardant spray (FX Lumber Guard XT - Exterior Fire Retardant ASTM E2768 CLASS A<sup>15</sup>)

### 6.4. Windows

- Two windows, one on the side of the door and one on another wall
- Smaller windows reduce the risk of theft and violence
- If budget allows, order extra windows to replace if current ones are broken
- Windows should be nailed/screwed in using only 6-8 nails/screws so that switching them out is easier
- Caulk to reduce air leakage

### 6.5. Doors

Doors are incredibly important for a resident's well-being and security. They provide privacy, dignity, and a separation between the outside world and the resident's home. It is often the first home they have had in years. Doors are also the primary access for robberies. Because of this, there are some security considerations when choosing doors. Doors should:

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15. The author was not paid to recommend this, or any other products mentioned in this guide. These are just tools that were successfully used by other tiny homes communities.

## A Home Of Their Own

- Open outwards. The homes are already small and a door that opens inward will remove some usable space from the footprint of the home. It will also be difficult to open in houses that are packed with belongings. Finally and most importantly, a door that opens outward is incredibly difficult to kick in because it involves breaking the lock as well as the entire door frame.
- Be steel. While you may not want to splurge on the most expensive security doors on the market, doors should be steel and have steel frames. They will withstand the abuse better, and discourage it because there is no real ability to break through.
- Be insulated. Any exterior steel door should be insulated, but not all are, so confirm that before its purchase. Steel skin with a foam core is an affordable and durable option.
- Not have windows. While the aesthetics may be appealing, you should not choose a door with a window in it. These are easy to break and more difficult to replace than a regular window. Additionally, any window on or near the door allows someone to break the window and reach in to disable the interior lock. If the residents want to see who is outside before they open the door, a peephole is a much better solution.
- Not have accessible screws. This is more a concern with garden shed-style doors, but if the hinges that attach the door to the home are fully on the outside of the home, anyone with a screwdriver can take the door off. The part of the hinge that the screws are in should be tucked between the door and the frame so that, when the door is closed, it is impossible to access.
- Be replaceable. As with windows, despite your best efforts, these doors will get destroyed. Ensuring that they are a standard size, relatively affordable, and potentially even buying a few extra from the manufacturer at purchase or during construction can ensure that if a resident has their door completely destroyed, your team can replace it immediately. This speed of response helps residents feel secure, deters future crime, and builds the residents' perception of the project's care and competency.
- Be customizable with locks. The best door is only as good as its lock, and whatever door you install, consider your locking system before going ahead. A balanced combination of door quality and lock quality will keep your residents safer than either alone.

## 6.6. Insulation

There are three main types of insulation that will likely be involved in this project. They all come with pros and cons.

### Spray Foam

Spray foam insulation is typically the most expensive but also has the highest performance. It has to be installed by licensed technicians but functions as both a vapour barrier and an excellent insulator.

### Batt Insulation

Batt insulation is traditionally made from fibreglass or stone wool.<sup>16</sup> It is the most cost-effective and can be easily installed by volunteers with minimal supervision. It does not function as a vapour barrier, so a layer of polyurethane is required along with the insulation. It is usually sized to fit between 12" or 16" gaps in between the framing of walls. It is soft and can usually be cut with a bread knife or a utility blade.

The major downside of batt insulation is that the fibreglass insulation can be irritating to the skin and lungs. Stone wool is less abrasive, but still can leave a rash if handled with bare skin. Gloves and masks are recommended when working with batt insulation.

### Rigid Board

Rigid board is a hard foam that usually comes in thin sheets. Although it does not insulate as well, its rigidity offers other benefits: easy to cut, and easy to work with bare hands, and good for anywhere you need the insulation to have some structure. However, it too does not function as a vapour barrier so it will need to be accompanied by a layer of polyurethane.

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16. Roxul is the brand name most commonly used here - the author was not paid to recommend this, or any other products mentioned in this guide. These are just brands that were successfully used by other tiny home communities.

### 6.7. Venting

Venting additional heat in the summer and preventing condensation in the winter is essential. Residents may not always feel comfortable opening their windows but there must be a supply of fresh air into the homes.

Rooftop vents at the peak of the houses can help provide some airflow without decreasing the security of the home.

### 6.8. Locks

A functional locking system for these tiny homes is vital to the health and wellbeing of any residents in a tiny home community. Below is a list of lock types with their relative advantages and disadvantages.

#### Deadbolts

In-door deadbolts offer a high level of security, especially when paired with a steel frame. They are more difficult to pick than a handle lock and cannot be cut like a padlock.

The downside is, if a key is lost, it is more difficult to regain entry. If deadbolts are the chosen locking system, then spare keys or a master key should be kept available at all times.

An added challenge: the presence of spare keys or master keys can turn a resident's suspicion towards the project in the event of a theft. Also, theft of the master key could render every lock useless. Therefore, managing these keys becomes an important on-site staff responsibility.

#### Handle Locks

Handle locks are very weak and barely function as a deterrent to theft in these settings. At the low end, these locks are easy to pick with a knife. If they come with a more expensive and robust locking system, they might act as some minor deterrent, but these are not ideal and should be avoided.

## Padlocks & Hasps

A combination of a hasp and a padlock is a good solution to quickly and easily install a lock on the door. This locking system goes on the outside of the home and consists of a hasp installed on the door, and then a padlock that holds the hasp closed.

The benefits of this system: quality padlocks are relatively inexpensive; all required parts can be bought at any major home centre; and it offers relatively good security to the residents.

Also, if a resident loses their key, the lock can be cut off with an angle grinder or bolt cutters and a new lock can be provided efficiently.

The downside of this locking system is that it is only as strong as its weakest link i.e. the hasp or the screws holding the hasp in place. Anyone with a large pry bar can tear the hasp out of the door and get in without being troubled by the lock.<sup>17</sup>

## Slide Bolts

Slide bolts are used to lock a home from the inside. They are attached to the door on the inside and the bolt then slides into the framing.

These are used by residents to lock their door from the inside while they are home.

The benefits of these locks is that they are impossible to pick or destroy from the outside. When combined with an outswing steel door a closed slide bolt is a very secure locking system.

The danger of these bolts is that getting in depends completely on being let in from the inside, a real problem if the resident is unconscious. Therefore,

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<sup>17.</sup> To address this, the hasps can be installed with steel bolts that go all the way through the door and doorframe. Still, there is no system that will prevent 100% of break-in attempts.

these locks should only be used where drug use is totally destigmatized and full harm-reduction measures are in place.

### 6.9. Fire Retardant

Fire retardants are the first line of defense against fires in the tiny homes. They can come as a specialized paint or a clear spray that slows down or eliminates the risk of a combustible material catching fire. Fire retardants should be added to all internal plywood as well as the exterior base and underside of the home.<sup>18</sup>

One option for fireproofing the homes is FX Lumber Guard XT - Exterior Fire Retardant ASTM E2768 CLASS A<sup>19</sup>. This product is easy to apply, non-toxic, and offers good protection.

Fire retardants should only be one part of your project's fire prevention plan. More about this will be covered later in this guide.

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18. The underside of the home is to prevent someone from committing arson by putting a burning object beside or underneath the home of another resident. This can also be prevented by putting skirting around the outside of the home and fireproofing that. Just ensure it is removable for any moving or leveling requirements.

19. The author was not paid to recommend this, or any other products mentioned in this guide. These are just tools that were successfully used by other tiny home communities.



# **7. Electrical Servicing**

## Electrical Servicing

Electricity is the lifeblood of a functional site. Water can be brought in and porta-potties substituted for sewage services, but electricity is non-negotiable. It is the source of heat, light, entertainment, and a key factor distinguishing your project from an unsanctioned encampment.

It also demands great care and safety. The power requirements for each home, location of the disconnects, electrical inspections (ESA and Esafe), and copper content of the wires are all things that will impact the final installation plan. Electricity will also be a key cost, so securing some donations of time and/or labour from a local company would be of huge value to your project.

No matter the project or the site, electricity will be a major part of getting it set up. Investing time and attention upfront will save big headaches and bigger bills down the road.

### 7.1. Calculating Your Electrical Needs

First, you will have to work with your electrical contractor to calculate the amperage requirement of each home and then of the site as a whole. When having these conversations, here are some questions and recommendations to consider:

Q- Should homes have one 20 amp circuit or two 15 amp circuits?

R- Either is fine - it depends on what you expect the residents to be doing in their homes. If there is a central cooking area then 20 amp is likely sufficient but if they are going to have microwaves, toasters, fridges, and heaters all running together then the two 15 amp circuits may be required. Keep in mind that having more power available will likely increase the draw of each home and your monthly electric bills.

Q- How many outlets should there be?

## Electrical Servicing

R- At least two outlets are recommended. Otherwise residents rely on extension cords and power bars to move electricity around their home. Outlets should also have USB options if possible.

Q- What will be hardwired?

R- One interior light, one exterior light, and a smoke detector.

Q- Where will the electrical disconnect be?

R- Electrical disconnect on the side of the building near the front door. This will make it easier to access if hoarding occurs and the sides of the house become surrounded by the resident's belongings. The front door will always remain somewhat accessible so a disconnect that is close to the door will also be easier to access.

Q- Who will coordinate the ESA / eSAFE inspection?

R- This should be coordinated by the electrical contractor and take place before the home is occupied.

Q- Where will power be coming from?

R- Power can come from hydro poles, existing buildings, or generators. Determine your power source, cost, and how much can be drawn from that infrastructure.

Q- If more tiny homes are added, where will they go and where will they draw power from?

R- If you are planning for expansion, work can be done now to make growth easier down the line. This is especially true if you are pulling power from a line or doing trenching to bury cables around the site. Plan for any future growth and put the necessary infrastructure in place at the start, if possible.

Q- Are any additional buildings planned that will need power?

## A Home Of Their Own

R- While the homes will be the major draw, if a washroom/laundry/shower facility is being built or a central kitchen area is in the works, consider the future power requirements when planning the overall electrical requirements.

Q- Will the cables need to be buried?

R- If teck<sup>20</sup> cable is being used to provide power to the homes, speak with the inspector to see if the cables need to be buried, put overhead, or if they can rest on the ground with plywood boxes built around them.

All of these come with issues if the project moves to another site. It is worth factoring in that possibility when making such decisions so tens of thousands of dollars worth of infrastructure don't have to be abandoned in the ground when a move happens.

## 7.2. Inspection and Certification

Electrical inspections (ESA / ESAFE)

Even if your homes are exempt from some/all building code requirements, electrical standards must be met for their hook-up. This could mean a minimum distance between homes, access to the disconnects, and an inspection of the internal electrical work, as well as the inspection of the entire electrical infrastructure on your site.

### Here are some suggestions:

- Complete the home inspection before a resident moves in. It is far more difficult for an inspector to access and approve a hookup for a home with someone already living in it. The resident could have tampered with the fire alarm, hooked up questionable extension cords to the system, or their belongings could prevent the inspection from happening at all. Any of these things could cause the home to fail and require more work and a

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20. Teck cable is a flexible armoured cable used to distribute electricity.

## Electrical Servicing

follow-up inspection.

- Work with a reputable electrical contractor. Not all electrical contractors are the same and the inspectors are very aware of who does what quality of work. Everything from the contractors' track record to the ratio of apprentices to licensed electricians will factor into this. Ask around in your community – especially large contractors or contacts at the city – about which contractors are highly rated by inspectors. Once these have been identified, explore if they are sympathetic to the cause and whether they might donate work or use volunteers to decrease labour and material costs.
- See if there is a “mobile” inspection option. If you plan on moving the homes because of a temporary site agreement, check if there is a mobile inspection option for the electrical certification. This means that the approval of an inspector is valid on the home no matter where it is located. If this can be obtained right at the start, it will remove the need for subsequent inspections every time the home is moved.
- Be good to your inspector. There are a range of inspectors who may be dispatched to your project, and each will have a different level of leniency with the project. Take the time to explain the mission of the project and your constraints. Be on time and be respectful. They have the power to save or cost you thousands of dollars.

Finally, while it can be a bother, the intention of these electrical inspections is to make sure the residents have a safe place to call home. We expect to live in safe dwellings. The residents of your community deserve the same.



**8.**

# **Plumbing and Sewage**

## **Plumbing and Sewage**

### **8.1. Portable Toilets**

Dealing with waste is one of the most challenging parts of running a tiny homes community. Having porta-potties that are regularly serviced is a good interim solution, but care must be taken that, when the operators come to empty or service them, the units are relatively clean, free of needles, and have not sustained serious damage.

Without access to washrooms, the project cannot exist, so a positive working relationship with your porta-potty supplier is essential. They should be informing you of small concerns before they become big concerns, calling you 30 minutes before the servicing crew arrives so the units can be cleaned by a resident or staff member, and you should always have an alternative toilet arrangement ready in case the contractor pulls the contract.

The servicing of these portable washrooms will be done by a vehicle commonly referred to as a 'honey wagon', a truck that sucks the waste out of a unit. If your site is using portable washrooms, you will have to consider these vehicles in your design. Place the washrooms near a paved surface so that the vehicle can get close enough for the operator to bring the hose in. Also, make sure that any fencing around the washroom area does not inhibit the access for these vehicles.

Finally, portable washrooms can present issues in the winter when the toilets themselves freeze. If all your portable washrooms freeze, then the residents have no safe way to use the washroom and another solution will have to be implemented.

### **8.2. Common Plumbing Issues**

With a traditional plumbing system, there are a few common issues once the project is up and running. For example:



## Plumbing and Sewage

- Flushing of needles and/or other sharp objects
- Flushing of fabric clothing or non-flushable wipes
- Flooding in the washrooms
- Opioid-induced constipation<sup>21</sup>
- Drug use in washrooms
- Destruction of washrooms

Signage and public education can also help reduce these specific problems. Still, it is helpful to have a plumber on call who understands the unique needs of the project and is sympathetic to the cause.

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20. Opiates inhibit normal bowel function, causing constipation and large, hard bowel movements that can block traditional toilets.



**9.**

# **Garbage Management**

## **Garbage Management**

### **9.1. Dumpsters**

Having a functional dumpster that is emptied on a regular schedule is essential for keeping the site clean. While it seems obvious, there can be no real encouragement or reliable routines about garbage removal if there is no place to put it. Therefore, job one for managing garbage on site is to commit to a dumpster contract with a local waste management company.

Dumpsters must be placed on a hard surface and their location must be accessible by a large truck for tipping and replacement. Dumpsters should also be near enough to the homes so that it is easier to bring waste to them, but not be located in the centre of the site. If any hardscaping is being done on site, a path to the dumpster is an excellent idea.

The best size dumpster is the 6-yard version with a closing lid. Any larger, and rotting food will attract wasps and other pests. If the frequency of servicing (tipping schedule) needs to be increased, that is fine but the bin should be no larger and must have a closing lid.

It is important that this dumpster is never completely full. Once it is, garbage will spill out and major cleaning will be required which can be demoralizing.

Finally, time the tipping of the bin to follow your major site cleanup day (detailed in section 9.2). This allows you to completely fill the bin before the truck comes to empty it.

### **9.2. Culture of Waste Collection**

Provide tools for residents to stay clean. Once the dumpster is in place the next step in keeping the site clean is equipping the individual residents with the tools to do so. Garbage bags, garbage bins, shovels, brooms, and other cleaning tools should be available to residents at all times. While there is an upfront cost

## Garbage Management

here, skipping the expense of cleaning supplies is shortsighted.<sup>22</sup> In the medium and long term, this easy access to cleaning tools and products will lead to a cleaner site that is more welcoming to all and likely to foster community support and the approval of neighbours.

The best garbage bags for this project are heavy-duty clear bags often used in commercial kitchens. There are two reasons for this: (1) the bags will receive a lot of abuse and a broken garbage bag is often so disheartening that a resident may just leave it and walk away; and (2) it is easy to see uncapped syringes through a clear bag. Black garbage bags are a major risk for needle poke injuries and should be avoided if possible.

Establish garbage day and pile limits. A great time to distribute the garbage bags and other cleaning tools and products to residents is on a pre-set weekly garbage day. Like any traditionally housed individual, residents will be motivated to clean their homes and remove excess waste on a known garbage day. Creating structure and routine like this in your community is one of many ways these projects restore residents' dignity.

When establishing the site's garbage day, it is also helpful to designate the site's "waste-free zones" — the pathways in which anything left lying in them will be discarded by site staff or volunteers<sup>23</sup>. Clearly explaining this and then marking the ground with some kind of paint or barrier is a great way to establish limits on hoarding, ensure paths are kept accessible for residents and visitors, and encourage general cleanliness on site.

Finally, garbage day should be scheduled during daylight hours and when there is a strong contingent of volunteers available. Ideally, it should also coincide with a tip of the dumpster later that evening. Otherwise, residents may go "binning" in the project's own garbage trying to find items of value. All residents

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22. If wasting garbage bags is a concern, large numbers can be bought wholesale and then are subdivided by volunteers into packs of 10 in ziplock bags. These can be given to each resident weekly as well as a larger number to community leaders or staff.

23. There is nuance to this on the ground. Don't throw away someone's bike because they left it in the wrong area on garbage day. As with all other elements of this project, the relationship must come first.

## A Home Of Their Own

should be made aware of the expectations and be engaged as active participants in garbage day duties.

Identify and support the main offenders. It will become clear quickly who the main offenders for garbage accumulation are on site. These will be residents who decline cleaning products, have homes encumbered by hoarding, and are highly reactive if volunteers or staff remove their items.

It is important to watch out for this and then intervene carefully. Hoarding is often a trauma response, so the best path forward with these residents is to support them rather than punish them. The first priority is that their belongings do not encroach on “waste-free zones” described above. After that is addressed, the hoarding near and within their home can be addressed privately with the resident, separate from the public nuisance issue.

Leverage volunteer and resident involvement. Site cleaning is an eternal and thankless task. It is made bearable only by collaboration, community, and the good spirits of residents and volunteers working together. If a good team is built for this task, it could go from one of the worst jobs on site to a genuine source of joy and highlight for the week.

Beyond consistency and ensuring everyone has the tools to help with cleaning, assemble teams of people to do the work, ensure they are trained to do it safely, and then set the tone of energy and enjoyment that will inspire residents and volunteers to bond. Music is a great tool for this. Finally, if a volunteer or resident is not able to do this work or not interested, then they can be engaged in another way. This job should never be compulsory, but every encouraging effort made to engage the residents somehow in the task.

That said, staff should always be on site and supervising when resident belongings are being discarded. A volunteer or resident may innocently discard something of great importance or value to the resident and that could lead to swift escalations and violence (another reason for clear garbage bags that make lost items easier to spot and recover). Staff who have the respect of the community must always intervene to help problem-solve and de-escalate if this occurs.

## Garbage Management

Done well, garbage removal can become a cornerstone of the week, and cleanliness can become a key factor distinguishing your project from the unsanctioned encampments it seeks to replace.

### 9.3. Hoarding

Hoarding is one of the most challenging things about housing this population. Even if you have only one resident with hoarding tendencies, it is helpful to know what you can do to mitigate the harm and work towards the root of the problem.

The [DSM-5 defines Hoarding Disorder](#) as:

*'Persistent difficulty discarding or parting with possessions, regardless of their actual value.*

*This difficulty is due to a perceived need to save the items and to the distress associated with discarding them.*

*The difficulty discarding possessions results in the accumulation of possessions that congest and clutter active living areas and substantially compromises their intended use. If living areas are uncluttered, it is only because of the interventions of third parties (e.g., family members, cleaners, or the authorities)<sup>24</sup>.*

*The hoarding causes clinically significant distress or impairment in social, occupational, or other important areas of functioning (including maintaining a safe environment safe for oneself or others)."*

Within the context of a tiny home community, hoarding can be understood as an accumulation of items that renders a home unusable and even dangerous to the resident OR accumulation that impairs the ability of the site to function

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24. This is where organizers come in. While your team may not be able to work with the individual to overcome their hoarding, you can apply appropriate interventions to ensure they live safely and their hoarding does not impact the lives of others or the wellbeing of the community.

## A Home Of Their Own

safely. In more practical terms, this means that the resident has so many belongings that their home is unusable to them<sup>25</sup> or that their belongings are sprawling from their personal space into the pathways or the spaces of others.

Remember: hoarding is a mental health condition to be treated with empathy<sup>26</sup>, not a personal failure of the resident. It is often a trauma response, and for those living on the street it is justified. The people living at your site have likely lost everything, probably more than once. Accumulation of items may make them feel safe and grounded, like they have a home.

That said, this sort of project is a community and so some guidelines are needed to help make it function for all. Here are some suggestions for organizers to help limit the impact of hoarding:

- Provide storage space. Tiny homes are after all tiny, and some behaviours that present as hoarding may be due to minimal storage space. Providing residents with a storage bin outside their home can be a first step towards meeting their needs without pathologizing or punishing their behaviour.
- Implement good garbage management. Consider again the suggestions about a garbage disposal system and garbage days. Building this culture of cleanliness is not a solution for individual hoarders, but it will make the overall site cleaner and then those who really struggle with hoarding will be more noticeable for empathetic intervention.
- Visually demarcate “common spaces”. Draw or paint a line in front of the homes to limit the sprawl of stuff. This visual barrier may end up being crossed, but once it is, the resident will expect a knock on their door from staff. Setting clear, predetermined, reasonable boundaries is a good way to balance the residents’ autonomy over their life with the need to maintain a clean site for everyone.

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25. There may be homes that are very full of items, garbage, etc, but still have the residents living inside them. Those would not meet this guide’s definition of hoarding. The residents served by these communities are free to live their lives in the way they see fit. As long as they are able to live inside their home in the way they choose and their belongings do not expand into common space, they are able to do so. This is a place to be mindful of the middle-class lens.

26. This author is not a mental health professional and this guide is not a substitute for proper mental health care for the residents. These statements are only intended to prepare organizers for the challenges they will face on site, not as a guide for care.



## Garbage Management

- Defer responsibility. When the time comes to have a conversation with the resident about hoarding<sup>27</sup>, maybe try to explain that there is a regulatory body insisting on the issue. For example, saying that the city is complaining or that the fire department has an upcoming inspection (likely true) is a way to start the conversation more collaboratively, making it less personal (me versus you) and more about the whole tiny homes community
- Find the minimum standard. Once the conversation is underway, clearly define a minimum standard that the resident must meet, e.g the demarcation lines mentioned above, all while reaffirming that within that standard the resident has freedom to do whatever they please within their space.
- Set timelines. When they understand what they need to do and why, make plans with them for when that standard will be met. It is important to remember that these residents are people with lives and preferences and obligations. They may not be willing or able to attend to it right away.
- Support the clearing process. To ensure the deadline is met, support the process. For example, come by with garbage bags and sit with them as they make decisions on items, then help removing bags once they are full. This is a great way to ensure they stay on task and complete the task while building a stronger relationship.
- Bring snacks. Clearing away items is challenging for anyone who struggles with hoarding. Any kindness, even something as simple as bringing a snack for the resident can show support and reduce anxiety. This can also help build / protect your relationship and acknowledge that they are doing something for the betterment of the whole community.

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27. You can use the word 'collecting' when talking with residents, instead of 'hoarding,' to soften the conversation. It is important to approach these issues without stigma or blame. It is not a personal failing of the resident that this is the trauma response / mental health condition they experience. Your job as an organizer is to help them meet the standard for living in the community, not to judge or to fix them.



# **10.**

# **Fire Prevention**

# Fire Prevention

Fires are the bane of the shelter world. When you combine the risk factors of cigarettes indoors, hoarding, candles, mental health issues, arson, and the catatonic effect of fentanyl use, you have a perfect storm of fire risks. Put all of these into a tiny home made of wood, and it's obvious why fire prevention is so important.

As a community, staff and residents can collaborate on fire prevention. The residents often know best what types of behaviours are high-risk and the staff can work with them to find tangible solutions, then implement the ones that best suit their needs.

Fires are also a triple threat to the project. They are dangerous/deadly for the residents, destroy the infrastructure of the site, and tarnish the reputation of the project.

While the risk of fire may seem discouragingly high, it is actually quite a bit lower for residents in tiny homes than if they were in tents.<sup>28</sup> Electric heaters are much safer than candles so it is easier to keep warm. Because the tiny homes are coated in fire suppressant, they are much safer than tents from both arson and accidental fires. Finally, there will be access to fire extinguishers and the ability to call for help because they are a part of a community.

Finally, the fundamental design of a tiny home project makes it resilient to fires (and damage in general) than traditional shelters. If there is a fire in one home, there is a better chance it will be contained and the home can be replaced for \$4,000 to 6,000. By contrast, if a shelter has a fire, the entire building is affected and costs of repair/replacement are likely much higher.

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28. This is another place where it is important to be mindful of the middle-class lens. The fire risk may seem high to someone who does not have experience on the street, but for the residents it is a much safer and more dignified solution than what they had before. This is one of many places where it is important to put the experience of the residents at the core of the project, not our own.

### 10.1. Fire Prevention Strategy

Over and above compliance with the requirements of your local fire department, it is well worth it to develop an overall and practical fire prevention and response strategy for the site, including fire extinguishers, fire retardants, candles, electronic hookups, heaters, and your relationship with the local firefighters. This strategy, although finalized by the team, must be made in consultation with the residents.

### 10.2. Fire Retardant

As noted earlier, fire retardants are your first line of defence against fires in a tiny homes community. They can come as a specialized paint or a clear spray and they serve to slow down or eliminate the risk of a combustible material catching fire. Fire retardants should be added to all internal plywood as well as the exterior base and underside of every home<sup>29</sup>. A good option for fireproofing the homes is FX Lumber Guard XT - Exterior Fire Retardant ASTM E2768 CLASS A - it's easy to apply and non-toxic.

### 10.3. Fire Extinguishers

Fire extinguishers must be available at regular intervals across the site, but also affixed to deter damage or theft.<sup>30</sup> Here are some suggestions:

- Place the extinguishers inside a "break in case of emergency" glass container. While this is not a totally preventative measure, it is a deterrent to taking the extinguisher. If the glass is broken and the extinguisher is gone, staff can look into the incident.

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29. The underside of the home is to prevent someone from committing arson by putting a burning object beside or underneath the home of another resident. This can also be prevented by putting skirting around the outside of the home and fireproofing that. Just ensure it is removable for any moving or leveling requirements.

30. This is the stubborn reality you will face again and again - anything with a market value that is left unattended can be stolen.

## A Home Of Their Own

- Designate dependable residents as 'Fire Marshals.' These residents would house the extinguisher in their home and place a badge on the door to indicate that they are equipped to respond to a fire.
- Put one extinguisher in every home. Distributing them widely through the site improves the chances that an extinguisher will be available when required. Affix them to the home in some way that makes them accessible, but not too easily removed, e.g on the underside of a loft bed or high on a back wall.
- Provide extinguishers for the most regularly present volunteers to keep in their vehicles. As the volunteer is present, so too is the extinguisher, safe and accessible.

Customizing the fire prevention strategy to the particular site is a worthwhile investment in overall safety for the residents, the project, and the neighbours.

## 10.4. The Fire Department

If there is a fire, however, firefighters should be called immediately. Even if the initial blaze has been put out by the fire extinguisher, they are trained to make sure it isn't still smouldering and able to re-ignite later.

If they are called, firefighters will likely want to know who on-site is responsible for the call and that they'll meet them on site to show them to the scene of the fire. That person should meet them at the road and guide them in to ensure they reach the scene quickly and without issues. This, along with clearly marking each tiny home with a number and having someone responsible on site at all times, will help reduce the risk of fire spreading.

Finally, although the project will have to go through fire inspections, it would be worthwhile to meet with the head of the local fire hall about the intended strategy before any issues arise. Inviting them to walk the site, see the home layout, and share any on-the-ground concerns in advance will improve the strategy and response if a fire does happen.

# **11.**

## **Coordinating a Move**

## Coordinating a Move

The cost of land, neighbourhood opposition, and challenges of getting municipal approval for a permanent site mean that your project may have to move several times during its lifespan. These moves are challenging, expensive, and hard on the residents. That said, there are ways your team can prepare in advance to make it less painful.

### 11.1. Required People and Other Preparation Tips

Based on experience, here are some suggestions about the people and planning needed to accomplish a successful move.

#### Electricians

Before the homes are moved, power will have to be cut to them, requiring a team of licensed electricians. Consult the project's electrical contractor about the moving date to ensure in advance that the required labour will be available when needed. Here are a few more things to consider when working with the electricians:

- Minimize the 'dark period'. Being in these homes without power is very difficult for the residents. Wait as long as possible to cut power to the homes. Let residents know exactly when that will happen so they can prepare, and have somewhere they can go right away.
- Remove electrical components from the site immediately. As soon as the power is cut, a team of volunteers should be collecting the electrical components (wires, fuses, etc) and bringing them to a secure location. These products have high black-market values and will be stolen if left unattended.
- Have a re-connection plan. Moving days are chaotic. Work with the electrical contractor in advance of the move to get the reconnection plan settled for the new site, including figuring out the new layout, the location of your power source, and bringing in any additional materials that may be required.



## Coordinating a Move

### Forklifts

Forklifts will be required whenever you need to move the homes either within the site or if you are moving to a new site entirely. There are three main things to know before deciding what kind of forklift to bring on site:

- The ground. If the ground is paved or gravel you can use a standard yard forklift. These have hard or inflated standard size tires. If you are operating on uneven surfaces, grass, or anything other than a hard packed surface, you will need a telehandler. A telehandler has the body of a small tractor and a large arm with forks that extend from the body that can lift a tiny home.
- The weight. The tiny homes are moved with the residents' belongings still inside them. Although an empty home may be only 3,200 lbs., they can be much much heavier with contents. If possible, secure a forklift with at least 8,000 lbs. load capacity and ideally one with 12,000 lbs. so that the machine will not struggle with even the heaviest homes and you don't waste time getting residents to clear out contents to allow for the move.
- The forks. No matter how powerful your machine is, it will not be able to lift the home if the forks can not extend far enough under the building. With shorter forks, homes that do lift are precarious and at risk of falling on their side during transport. With an 8'x10' home, a forklift with 8' forks should be sufficient in almost all cases.
- The operators. Finally, ensure you have a qualified and licensed operator and a spotter available whenever a forklift is in use. These two individuals will work as a team to make sure that all the homes are moved safely and carefully to their next destination.

### Flatbed Trucks

If the project has to move sites or has more homes delivered, flatbed trucks will be needed to get the bulk of the move done. They are not especially complicated, but it is worth it to factor in the dimensions allowed on a standard flatbed truck when designing your homes at the outset. This will help you avoid any 'oversize load' permits when a move or delivery is required. Here is the base-line information that A Better Tent City learned about when moving/delivering

## A Home Of Their Own

homes on a standard flatbed trailer:<sup>31</sup>

- Length – 48' long – Most trailers are 48' long, but in some cases you can overhang either the front or rear of the trailer and still be legal.
- Width – 8'6" wide – This is the maximum width throughout the US and Canada. Exceeding this dimension will require special permits.
- Height – 8'6" high – The max legal height in most areas is 13'6", but when you account for the flatbed height of 5' you're left with 8'6" max height of your cargo.
- Weight – 48,000 lbs – The max combined weight of the tractor, trailer, and cargo cannot exceed 80,000 lb. without a special permit. This allows about 48,000 lbs for your cargo.

Finally, these companies are busy but often locally owned and sympathetic to the mission of such a project. If you can find a friendly owner, and let them know the move day well in advance, they may be willing to give the project a break on costs. Just be sure the correct forklifts are booked so that, come moving day, the driver's time isn't wasted.

## Volunteers

There will be a staggering amount of labour to do before, during, and after a move. Building a robust team of general site volunteers will save hours of work and make the whole process go more much smoothly.

## Outreach Workers

While the electricians, forklifts, and flatbeds can take care of the homes, someone has to be responsible for the residents. This is where having additional support from outreach workers is crucial. Moving days are challenging for anyone, but with this community, the combination of trauma and mental health issues make it even more difficult.

Outreach workers can help people navigate the disruption, give rides

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31. These considerations were all accounted for in the blueprints included with this guide

## Coordinating a Move

between sites, and support them even in the smallest ways that residents might appreciate or need. They can also assist if a resident goes into crisis and work with them one-on-one to ensure that they are all right and that the moving effort stays on track.

### 11.2. Residents' Expectations

Beyond managing the trades and volunteers, it is essential to account for residents' expectations and trust. Communicating with residents about the motivation for the move, its logistics and their involvement, and then following through will protect trust and minimize any issues on moving day.

#### Share the move schedule

A week before the move, share the move schedule with residents. This can include key tasks that need to be completed in advance of the move as well as an hourly breakdown of moving day and a schedule for setting up the new site.

This will help the residents prepare for the move, include them in the process, and build trust that this move is not some sort of ploy to end the project.<sup>32</sup>

#### Tell them how to prepare

There will be things the residents have to do to prepare for the move. Although their homes will be moved with their belongings inside, they will have to remove any outside additions to their homes, store their belongings or agree to have them stored during the move, and take any hanging or fragile items off the walls.

A good rule of thumb is to prepare the home as if there was going to be an earthquake. Between the forklifts, the flatbeds, and the repositioning, these

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32. The sad reality is this happens. Moves can bring up past trauma from becoming unhoused. Be kind and understanding with any residents who have concerns or act strangely at this time. We only know a small portion of their stories.

## A Home Of Their Own

homes will be fairly shaken by the time they reach their destination.

### **Conduct pre-move check-ins**

After the expectations are communicated, staff should conduct pre-move check-ins with the residents. That can go a long way in helping them feel reassured and calm amidst the commotion. Ensure they understand the move plan, are prepared to do it, and have their questions answered as well as possible.

Be mindful here not to pressure them to pack too far in advance. Due to the size of the tiny homes, residents will likely not be able to live in them once they are packed up. This means a lot of unavoidable last-minute preparations.

### **Ensure the security of their home**

Robbery and theft is a reality on the street and the chaos of a move is no different. Staff should take steps to reassure residents that their belongings will be safe throughout the move.

One option for this is to use theft-resistant screws. Once a home is ready, staff can drill the door shut using a non-traditional theft-resistant screw head, then tape the door shut. The resident can watch that happen and sign their name over the tape to ensure the door stays sealed.

This has two benefits. Firstly, it reassures the resident that no one will enter their home until they do after the move. Secondly, it prevents the doors from swinging open during transport and flinging their worldly possessions all over the road.

## **11.3. Arrival Details**

Long before the move begins, the arrival site should be planned out, levelled, and the location of all the homes determined. This will be invaluable to a smooth arrival.

## Coordinating a Move

Residents may want to return to their homes as soon as they start arriving at their new site. Give them a time and a rallying point for them to arrive at the new site. Some residents may need help getting to the new site if they left for the day and outreach workers or volunteers can be help with that. Once the residents arrive and the homes are cleared to be re-opened, organizers should remove the theft-resistant screws and break the tape while the resident watches. This follows through on the promise of security offered initially and helps retain trust with the residents.

If there are delays (e.g. issues with power connection or any other arrival details) be transparent about that with the residents. Sharing openly what you know and what specific barriers are holding up the process will be reassuring and may allow residents to become part of the solution.



# **12.**

# **Neighbour Relations**

## Neighbour Relations

Your relationships with the other homes and businesses in the area is vital to the long-term success of the project. While NIMBYism (the “not in my backyard” attitude) is still too prevalent in our society, there are proactive ways to engage with the neighbourhood that can mitigate much of the resistance.

### 12.1. Arrival Details

The job of cultivating ambassadors, allies, and volunteers should begin immediately, and as far ahead of the site’s set-up as possible<sup>33</sup> with special emphasis on the neighbours and communities directly bordering the site.

Inviting the neighbours to come to the site for a barbecue, bringing them for tours in small groups, making a video to address the neighbours directly, or recruiting them to your volunteer team are all great ways to build bridges between the original community and the project as a new addition to the neighborhood.

### 12.2. Building a Beautiful Site

Neighbours who are dismissive and negative about this project likely have predetermined ideas of what a homeless community looks like. It is up to the staff, volunteers, and residents to prove them wrong. It may seem strange to be discussing beauty at a site like this, but in fact it is very important, both to the residents and to their neighbours. Working together to create a beautiful site will both improve life for the residents and also serve as a first defence to any opponents who want to use the site’s appearance to embarrass and discredit the project.

Here are some ways staff can lead this effort:

1. Allow residents the time, tools, and materials to pursue their own sense of

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33. This should only happen once the location is public, of course.



## Neighbour Relations

beauty. If they aspire to paint, get them some brushes. If they write, a notebook or beautiful pens. If they play guitar, find an instrument they can use. Open the doors of possibility that they want to walk through. If they want to add a flower garden, bring them the tools. If they want a motivational message written on their homes, bring paint and stencils to put it up.

2. Appreciate the beauty they create. Notice when they repainted a wall. Their authentic expression is more valuable than anything staff could come up with.
3. Beautify the site alongside the residents: play music while you work, commission murals for the backs of the homes, tell jokes, plant a garden, have birthday parties. Whatever it is, work done to create beauty on site is never wasted. It is what makes this worth doing.

The corresponding effort of this beautification is having proper waste management protocols, harm reduction partners, and washroom facilities to alleviate the worst of the stigmatized behaviours and downsides that concern neighbours.

With all of these efforts working in concert, your project can become a beautiful site that fits into the fabric of its neighbourhood and the surrounding community.

### 12.3. Guided Tours

While it may quickly become wonderfully familiar to residents and staff alike, this distinctive project will likely be a place of fear and mystery for the majority of neighbours, politicians, and other supporters. This gulf between the world of the street and the non-street world is large, but can effectively be bridged by a tour and talk. Many of the best supporters, volunteers, and donors for these projects begin their involvement by coming for a tour.

At A Better Tent City, guided tours were given multiple times a week. The project's team prioritized the broader community gaining access to the inner

## A Home Of Their Own

workings of the site and residents knew to expect it<sup>34</sup>. Several extroverted residents with particularly beautiful homes were tapped by staff or volunteers to be “model citizens” so that the tourists could see inside a tiny home and get to know someone there. This was always done with the consent of the resident and they were never cajoled or enticed to do it. It was a tribute to the beauty of their home and they rarely refused.

The chosen guide should be passionate about the project, respected by the residents, and able to effectively translate the street experience for a middle-class perspective.

### **12.4. Thefts in the Area**

Beyond positive engagements, residents must also be told that there will be zero tolerance for thefts and criminal acts against the site’s neighbours. Staff must communicate clearly that any criminal acts occurring in the neighbourhood will be blamed on the project, jeopardizing its stability and long-term success.

This should be included in the commitments that residents agree to when joining the community and re-affirmed and enforced regularly.

### **12.5. A Managed Complaint Route**

Even with all these proactive measures in place, conflict between this project and the surrounding neighbourhoods will occur. Providing an email or phone number for neighbours to express concerns can help alleviate small issues early and even turn opponents into allies. It also proactively offers reassurance when the project is moving into a new neighbourhood.

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34. A rule of hospitality for individuals seeking to take tours of your community - always act as if you are entering someone else’s home, because that is what you are doing. Guests were encouraged to bring coffee, doughnuts, or some other gift of hospitality for the residents. This had the dual effect of setting the expectation of respect for the guest and encouraging the residents to welcome, rather than dread, tours. It also led to organic conversations between residents and guests. Win-win-win.

# **13.**

# **Food**

# Food

Eating together is at the core of any community, and your community of tiny homes is no different. Great food connects people, gives them a reason to gather, and tells them they are loved and deserving of love in a way that no words can.

That said, like with any major operation, there are some unique details about providing food in this setting that will have to be addressed.

### **13.1. Who buys the residents food?**

First, who is responsible for purchasing and preparing food for the residents? This could be the residents. If your project is focused solely on housing, then it would be the residents themselves. If however food support is a core element of the project, then it will be the responsibility of staff or volunteers or delegated by them to volunteers or arranged through outside suppliers (e.g. a food bank or community).

Gaps in the inventories and deliveries happen. Things like pop, juice boxes, candy, coffee, etc. may go much faster than they can be restocked. Residents may be happy to receive surprises like coffee and donuts in the morning or their favourite tea order when brought by staff or volunteers. Remembering small details like this is one of the joys of the work and it is worth building budget space for these incidentals.

### **13.2. Where does cooking take place on site?**

Whether you have an "official" kitchen or not, cooking will be taking place on site. It will either be in a central cooking area, on an outdoor barbeque, or using hotplates and microwaves in resident's homes. In warmer months, people may even make a campfire outside their homes and roast meat on a stick.

Accounting for the creativity of the residents, it would be prudent for staff to designate a safe space for cooking in a common area. This could be anywhere

from a full commercial kitchen to a series of barbeques set up together outside on a patio. Regardless, if the site does not offer some way to at least reheat food, there will be a higher risk of fire because of improper cooking tools and methods.

### **13.3. How are food and cooking tools stored on site?**

Regardless of how cooking is arranged, safe, secure, lockable storage for certain items will be needed if they are going to be held on site. Some food items like white sugar, pop, candy, fruit, juice, and milk will be taken and hoarded if they are left unattended for any length of time. Other kitchen tools like pots, pans, and knives will also go missing.

When considering the design of the kitchen, have a lockable room or pantry. This will ensure that everyone gets what they need, and no one takes it all. If certain staff/volunteers have keys, they could set 'store hours' when they are present to supervise residents helping themselves. It also helps the work of cooking when certain foods and cooking utensils are reliably available. Such arrangements have the dual benefit of ensuring a great meal for the residents and honouring the time and efforts of volunteers.

### **13.4. Where do people eat?**

Once the food has been prepared, the residents need a place to eat. This may be back in their homes, but if a central structure can be erected with some tables for communal eating, that is a much better solution for easier food distribution and clean up, but more importantly for community building. This community is no different than any other -- sitting around a table to break bread forms deep connections among residents, volunteers, and organizers alike.

### **13.5. Who cleans up?**

After a meal, there will be dishes to wash, etc. If the site has a kitchen with a

## A Home Of Their Own

proper sink, it is just a matter of assigning someone to the job. If not, disposable plates and cutlery will have to be available for use on-site and cooking/serving utensils will have to be taken off-site to be cleaned and then returned.

As for the general cleaning of the kitchen area, backup cleaning supplies should be kept in locked cabinets to augment the supplies that are out and available to residents to encourage ad hoc cleaning. These supplies can also be available to volunteers or to residents upon request.

Cleaning the kitchen is a job that could be paid if your project decides to proceed with paying for such chores.

### **13.6. A note on food-safe kitchens**

The project may be pressured to have the 'kitchen' inspected as a food safe commercial kitchen. It is up to the team whether to support this, but serious challenges come with attempting to meet this standard. It is an expensive upfront cost that is highly susceptible to damage, unlikely to be properly maintained by residents, and could draw the concern of your local health department. At the first location of A Better Tent City, the kitchen was defined as a shared residential-style kitchen, similar to what you one may find in a group home. Of course care was taken with the food and food safety procedures were followed, but it meant a commercial standard did not need to be met and inspectors were not dropping into an environment that was often chaotic.

# **14. Staffing, Volunteers, and Site Management**

## **Staffing, Volunteers, and Site Management**

Beyond the technical aspects mentioned in this guide, there are major human resource elements that determine the long-term success or failure of these projects. The details of these are outside the scope of this technical guide, but below are three suggestions based on experience:

### **14.1. Staffing and Support**

Such a project will require some sort of consistent staffing, either a live-in site manager<sup>35</sup> or a team of experienced outreach workers who coordinate work in shifts. While there are many skills and attributes that make a successful staff member, it is absolutely essential that they be able to set and hold strong boundaries, be empathetic, and have a demonstrated understanding of the realities of street life.

On site staff will be chiefly responsible for helping residents when they get into trouble, de-escalating conflict, knowing who to call if there is an issue with the physical maintenance, and acting as a contact for volunteers, donors, and visitors.

### **14.2. Volunteer Management**

Beyond the few staff members, this project will rely primarily on the energy, talent, and time of unpaid volunteers, from the board of directors to the people who come to help on garbage day.

Because of this, volunteers are a powerful resource to attract, relate to, and manage thoughtfully and with respect. The recruitment, retention, and sometimes dismissal of on-site volunteers will be a key duty for any project staff.

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35. While this is the case for A Better Tent City, finding the right person to live on site and do this is exceptionally rare.



Whenever possible, try to build task teams that are a combination of residents, volunteers, and staff. Whether it's cooking, cleaning, painting a mural, or playing guitar, these collaborations give the residents a sense of pride, volunteers a sense of connection, and staff a reminder of why they do the work they do.

### 14.2. Boundaries

Boundaries are one of the most important success factors for staff and the life of the project, by protecting staff and the project itself. Keep in mind: residents are vulnerable to being victims of exploitation and abuse as well as the perpetrators of it. Healthy boundaries are a first line of protection for everyone involved.

#### **Some examples of boundaries for a variety of contexts:**

- Money: Do not get involved with money, loans, and debts on site.
- One-on-one time: Do not be alone with residents without a witness or other party present.
- Sexual/romantic relationships: No volunteers or staff shall engage in any sexual or intimate relationships with a resident.
- Rides: Staff will not give residents rides except for medical or legal appointments.
- Commerce: Staff will not charge any resident for any goods, nor will they buy goods from the residents.
- Address: Staff will not share their home address with the residents.
- Personal Cell: Staff will not share their personal cell phone numbers.
- Drugs: Staff will not touch, move or interact in any way with residents' drugs.
- Knocking: Staff will always knock loudly before entering a home.
- Payment: Any payment for resident labour on site will be provided in cash directly to the resident who did the work. Payments cannot be forwarded to others by the resident. If money is owed, residents have to pay the second party themselves.

These are of course all examples, and any project's team will have to customize their own boundaries.

## A Home Of Their Own

Although they may seem restrictive, a good boundary is a gift to all involved. Boundaries let the residents know what to expect and where the lines are in their relationship with others. It provides clarity on the limits of what staff / volunteers provide and equality in treatment of individuals. It also protects residents from predatory staff / volunteers who may want something from them.

Moreover, boundaries protect the project. It keeps each board / staff member or volunteer away from the most troublesome aspects of street life and stops the chaos inherent in that culture from seeping into their personal lives. If such a board/staff member or volunteer, especially with the backing of peers and the project, builds a reputation within the community as someone who adheres to a certain set of boundaries, that will go a long way to squash false rumours and grow trust further.



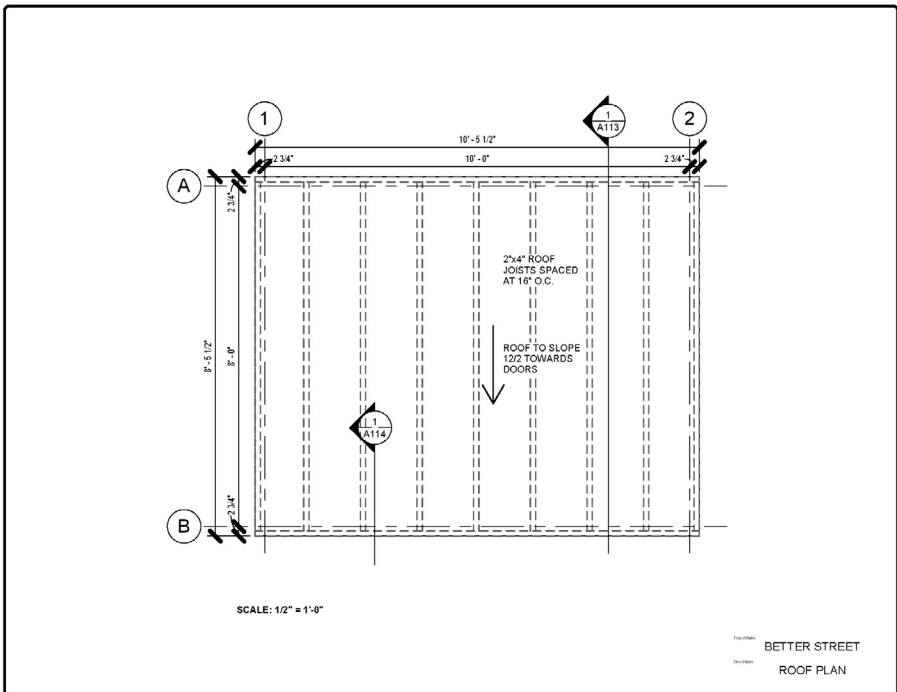
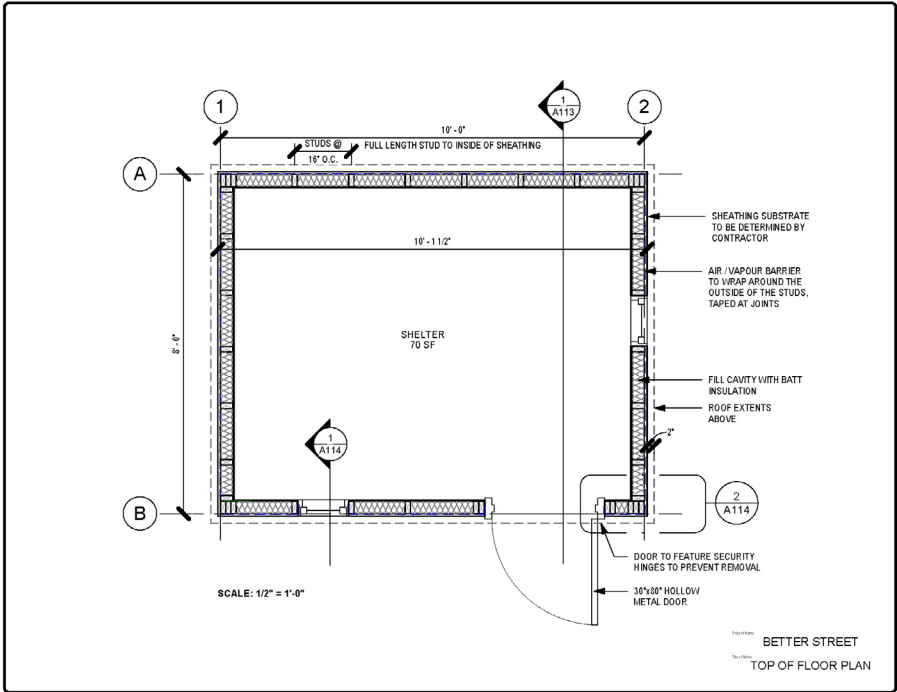
## **Acknowledgements**

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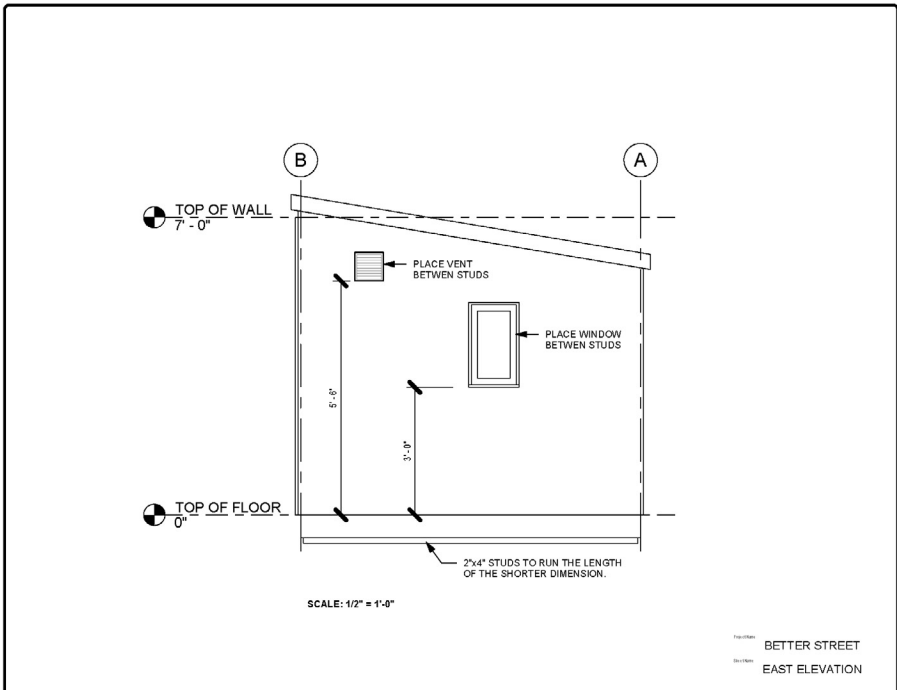
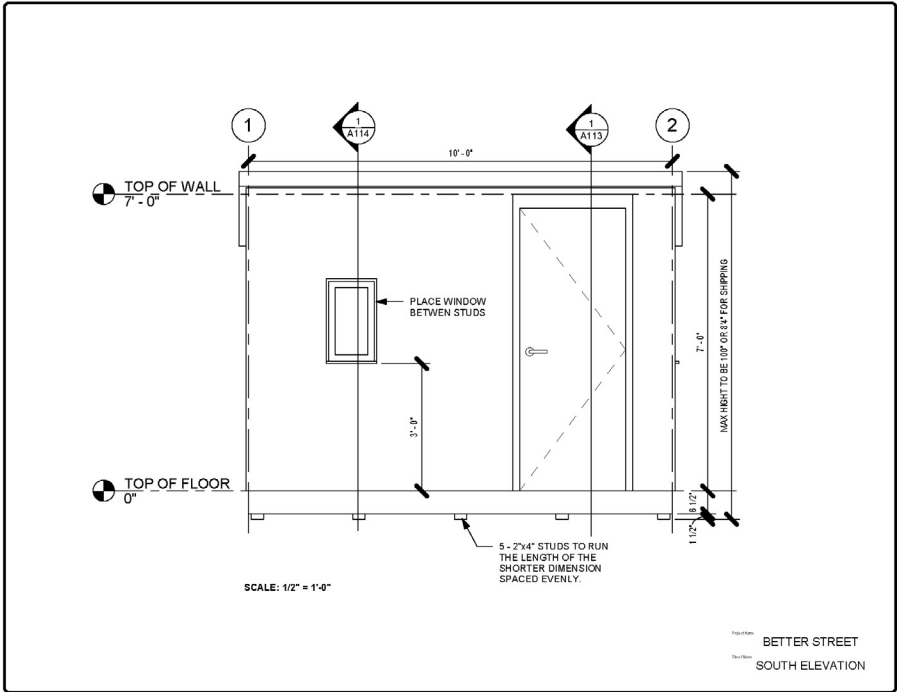
Finally, I thank the volunteers and staff who laboured and still labour tirelessly to launch projects like this across Canada. Your work is powerful, dignified, and helps people who have been given up on by too many and for too long.

Thank you.

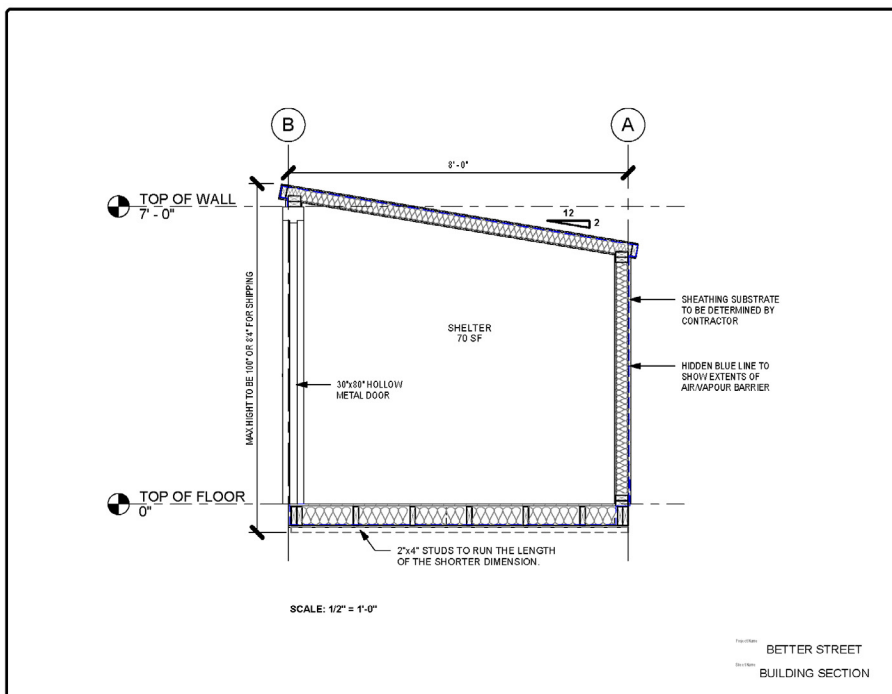
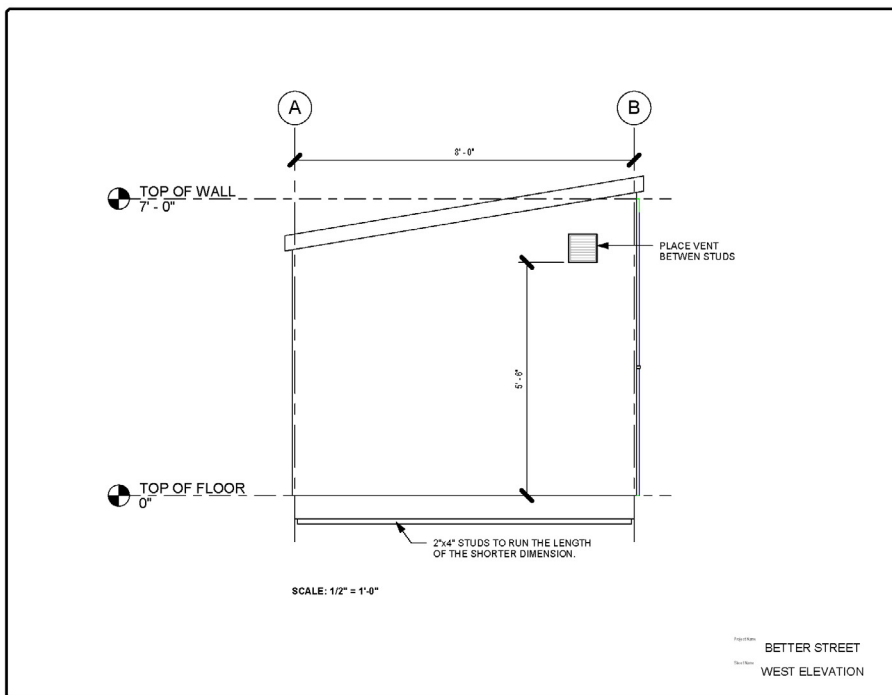
# Tiny Home Plans



# A Home Of Their Own



# Tiny Home Plans



# A Home Of Their Own

