

From Tent City to Tiny House Villages: Exploring Non-traditional Transitional Housing Models for New Haven

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Background

According to Connecticut’s Coordinated Action Network (CAN) registry, on February 16, 2021 there were 460 homeless individuals in Greater New Haven. This is an increase of 103 persons from the previous year.¹ The COVID-19 pandemic has increased economic insecurity, and by the same token housing insecurity. However, it has also created a window of opportunity to rethink how New Haven approaches homelessness.

During the pandemic, in addition to providing hotel accommodations for homeless individuals, the city of New Haven allowed a tent encampment along West River, in light of the urgent need to decompress congregate shelters. With the support of Amistad Catholic Worker, the tent encampment - hereafter referred to as Tent City - has grown and achieved a level of self-governance and structure. Tent City’s uncertain future and the positive developments this quasi-experiment in tacit-sanction has produced have prompted Amistad Catholic Worker to think about the role Tent City plays as a transitional space in addressing homelessness in New Haven and what can be done to build on its strengths. Amistad Catholic Worker is especially interested in understanding how a tiny house village would fit within the context of New Haven as a transitional living environment.

Objectives

- 1) Explore and understand elements of alternative models for transitional housing that incorporate self-governance, community-building, and dignified living spaces from “experts” in transitional housing models
- 2) Understand the significance and value of Tent City for its residents as well as for New Haven stakeholders in homelessness services, such as service providers and city officials in New Haven.
- 3) Identify Tent City residents’ priorities for the future of Tent City and their thoughts on a tiny house village model of housing.
- 4) Identify beliefs, concerns and points of optimism regarding building a tiny house village in New Haven from New Haven stakeholders in homelessness services.

Methods

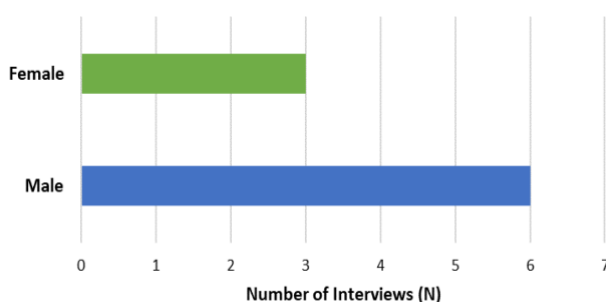
Our purposeful sampling for semi-structured interviews spanned three domains: (1) “Experts” (n=7) in established alternative transitional housing models, (2) New Haven stakeholders in homelessness services (n=12), including service providers, city officials, and (3) Tent City residents (n=9).

We used a two-step rapid analysis approach to reduce and analyze our data. Structured templates and matrices were developed and populated to summarize transcripts and aggregate quotes. Tent City resident interviews were coded deductively using salient themes in the structured templates. Analysis of interviews was verified by a second team member for validity, and discrepancies were resolved by discussion and consensus.

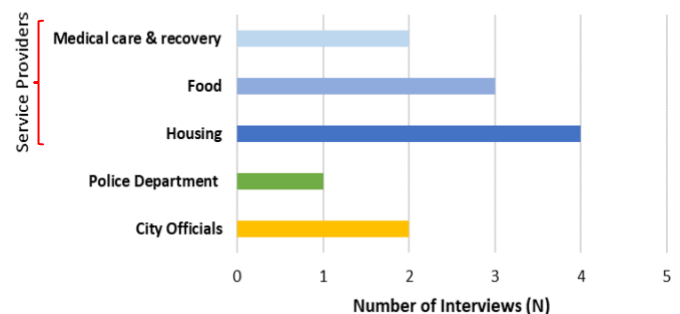
Locations of “Experts” in Alternative Housing Models



Number of Interviews with Tent City Residents (by gender)



Number of Interviews with New Haven Stakeholders (by domain)





Results

Across interviews with representatives from established alternative transitional housing models, New Haven service providers, and Tent City residents, six main themes emerged:

1. *There is a mismatch between the structure of New Haven's shelter and rehousing system and the realities of those it is meant to serve.*

There are not enough supportive services, staff, capacity, or flexibility, – especially when it comes to helping those with mental health conditions and substance use disorder – in shelters and in rapid rehousing. Curfews, undue surveillance, discrimination, and unfair and selectively enforced rules also create issues in shelters and rehousing programs. These drove many to leave shelters and rehousing programs and choose the Tent City.

2. *New Haven made strides in improving the shelter system during COVID-19 pandemic and should build on this momentum*

COVID-19 offered a window of opportunity: providing a hotel model of shelter that allowed more independence and privacy for residents, more centralized services, and the ability to keep couples together. The hotel model of shelter has its own challenges, including the need for appropriate training for hotel staff.

3. *Tent encampments have existed in New Haven and will continue to exist for the foreseeable future.*

Whether or not the city acts to formally support Tent City, the current economic and political system will continue to produce informal tent encampments. Cities across the country have found approaches to legally permit encampments.

4. *A village model of housing is cost effective, promotes harm reduction, and provides benefits that are absent from traditional shelter systems.*

A village model of housing can better meet the needs of individuals for whom the traditional shelter system doesn't work. For example, a village model better accommodates those with mental health conditions and histories of trauma, provides a more dignified and secure living environment, and allows residents to take ownership over the place they live and build a community. It is also less costly than traditional shelter spaces.

5. *A city-sanctioned tent encampment or tiny house village will require supportive services.*

People experiencing homelessness can have mental health conditions, substance use disorders, trauma, and/or other needs that require support, and supportive services are also crucial in helping residents find permanent housing. A village model allows more efficient centralization of supportive services.

6. *Transitional village models such as tent encampments or tiny houses are ultimately not the answers to homelessness, more low-income housing is.*

Caution should be taken to ensure that the village model is truly transitional and that it does not divert political will for addressing the root cause of homelessness: insufficient availability of low-income housing.

“ Even if we can get them into supportive housing, there isn't enough money to provide the wraparound service to keep them in that housing long term. ”

- New Haven service provider

“ ...like people getting kicked out. Like for reasons that don't seem reasonable, like and it's cold, it's wintertime. You're gonna kick someone out in January, like out of the blue? ”

-Tent City resident on shelters

“ It's important to provide as much dignity and privacy as we can to people, and that's going to help them heal as opposed to a prison-like congregate setting. ”

- New Haven service provider on the hotel model of shelter

“ ...there's a permanence to it [the Tent City] that we don't – our current policy doesn't acknowledge. ”

- New Haven service provider

“ There are certain people for whom it's always unsafe to stay in a congregate shelter setting. There are people who need to stay in shelter all day, and not just overnight, because you know, they have medications they need to refrigerate or need to rest or you know, any number of things. ”

- “Expert” in Transitional Housing

“ I think it's great in the sense that like it's localized, you know – like we get many services, many people that come here to help us and that know we're here. ”

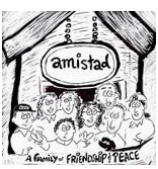
-Tent City resident on the Tent City

“ Well I'd like to get my own apartment. I got a lot of disabilities. My whole left side is umm Got a lot of disks. Stuff wrong with my neck. So, I got a lot of problems ”

-Tent City resident

“ I know, it's not a one, two, three thing. So I'm not expecting to happen overnight. But, you know, eventually, you know, I would like housing. ”

-Tent City resident



“ They’re very, very welcoming, very helpful ... they look out for you. I came back from downtown and I had food waiting for me inside my tent, you know, they actually think about you. So that was, you know, heartwarming. – Tent City resident ”

“ It’s called tent city, but it’s more like the village. Just a little tight knit community here. – Tent City resident ”

Recommendations

Short term solutions

- 1 Formally recognize and support Tent City as an immediate solution to the reality of the shelter system in New Haven.
- 2 Phase out congregate shelters and utilize a hotel model to meet the needs of a wider spectrum of people, building on the experience with hotel housing during COVID-19.

Medium term solutions

- 3 Build a village model of housing, such as tiny house village, that is transitional and targeted towards individuals who do not fit within New Haven’s shelter system
- 4 Invest more resources in wrap-around supportive services to get people into housing and help them maintain their housing.

Long term solutions

- 5 Investing in low-income housing is key for effectively addressing homelessness long term.

Limitations

- *Many of the Tent City residents interviewed were not long-term residents at Tent City. Their views of Tent City therefore may be different from residents that stayed there for a longer period of time.*
- *There are not many established transitional village models in the Northeast to learn from.*
- *When asking interviewees about their thoughts about a tiny house village in New Haven, there was not a unified understanding of what this would look like.*

Acknowledgments

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REFERENCES

1. CT CAN Data. “2/16/2021 BNL Weekly Status Report – Individuals.” <https://ctcandata.org/2021/02/16/bnl-weekly-status-report-individuals-125/>