

# Can Alternative Living Encampments Help with the Homelessness Crisis?

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*Tents where residents live are set up in enclosures at Camp Hope that help keep out the wind and rain. at Camp Hope on May 5, 2020 in Las Cruces, New Mexico. Camp Hope is a formalized encampment which gives homeless residents a chance to get back on their feet and eventually find a new home.*

## **Advocates fear they're a stopgap solution that could become permanent.**

Last year, Jose Morales found himself homeless, sleeping behind a Walmart in Las Cruces, New Mexico. The former machine operator and occasional landscaper had lost his housing in Anthony, a small town that straddles the Texas-New Mexico border.

Needing a place to set up camp, he selected the site behind Walmart so he could keep a low profile while being close enough to ask for help if he needed it. "I was looking for a place to feel safe," he said.

One day, after stopping at the nearby El Caldito soup kitchen for a meal, Morales heard about a possible opportunity for improved shelter: Camp Hope. A formalized encampment for people experiencing homelessness, the facility is run by the Mesilla Valley Community of Hope, a nonprofit that provides an array of housing, case management and other social service programs

for the local homeless population. After a brief intake process, Morales secured a campsite on the sprawling campus at the southern edge of town.

Camp Hope is about an acre in size and consists of a few dozen campsites spaced out in neat rows. Most of the tents are set up inside individual shed-like structures that help keep out the wind and rain. There's an on-site kitchen, running water and bathrooms. For someone in Morales' situation, being at Camp Hope was a big improvement.

He also feels much safer than he did behind the Walmart. He no longer has to worry about being discovered or harassed by landowners or police. At regular meetings, he and his fellow residents hash out rules. At Camp Hope, those include prohibitions on open fires and smoking inside tents. The encampment is fenced, and Morales participates in 24-hour security patrols around it.

Theft is not unheard of, but Morales feels comfortable leaving his tent and his bicycle to work temporary jobs in town during the day. He's received help with acquiring a driver's license and is looking forward to one day getting a permanent job and home.

"It's a nice place for the next step," he said.

Formalized encampments like this are popping up in other cities around the West. Aberdeen and Olympia, Washington, have set up new encampments in recent years, and Spokane and Durango, Colorado, are also thinking about transitional living options. The benefits are clear: It's a quick, cost-effective way for cities to provide a safe and sanitary alternative housing option for people experiencing homelessness. Still, housing advocates worry that it's merely a Band-Aid, taping over a much larger societal problem. Worse, they fear it diverts political capital away from the search for a lasting solution.

**THE HOMELESSNESS CRISIS HAS** overwhelmed the West. States like Washington, Oregon, Nevada and California are dealing with large homeless populations; an estimated 150,000 people live without permanent housing in California alone. Addiction, mental illness, rising rents and limited shelter beds all push a slice of that population to seek refuge outside.

People have to sleep somewhere, after all, but laws generally prohibit camping on either public or private property. With no official authorization, those in need improvise shelters wherever they can — usually in parks, along trails, in alleys or under bridges, but sometimes even in front yards or parking lots.

For municipal or county leaders under pressure to do something about the situation, officially sanctioned encampments offer key selling points. Trash removal and sanitation are easy to handle at a central location. Staffers can be posted to help with security and the development and enforcement of camp rules. And, assuming a local government has some vacant land or a spare parking lot, camps can be assembled in a matter of weeks. If need be, they are easy to break down and move.

"It's not like buying a building or leasing a building, where you're kind of stuck," said Colin DeForrest, the homeless response coordinator for Olympia, Washington. There, officials set up an encampment with potable water, waste disposal, perimeter fencing and an on-site host to watch over the 115 tent sites.

Another advantage for political leaders: Camps are cheap. Between staff and supplies, DeForrest said, his facility costs about \$250,000 per year to operate. (The city is looking to boost on-site services, which would double that price.) In Las Cruces, Nicole Martinez, executive director of the Mesilla Valley Community of Hope, said she spends \$12,000 per year on supplies and insurance for Camp Hope, plus the cost of one full-time staffer. Compare that to Albuquerque,

where voters passed a measure last fall allocating \$14 million for the construction of a new 300-bed emergency shelter, which should be completed in 2021-22.

Formal camps solve some of the other logistical challenges involved in serving a sprawling homeless population. It's easier to help people if they're all at one location; Camp Hope, for example, offers nearby assistance with food, job opportunities and permanent housing.

**FOR THOSE IN FAVOR** of these encampments, the success of Morales and other camp residents who have found some stability is a proof of concept. People like DeForrest see homelessness as an immediate public health issue that requires quick action. "It's mitigating human suffering and health and safety concerns," he said. "I would definitely recommend it to any city."

David Dollahon, the assistant city manager of Las Cruces, considers the camp a success even though he is not comfortable with the idea of people living outside on a long-term basis. "It has worked out well for us," he said, adding, "I hate to think of it as a permanent solution, but it is. We don't see it going away."

But advocates like Jenny Metzler, the executive director of Albuquerque Healthcare for the Homeless, see that very permanence as the problem.

For Metzler, homelessness is not a hopelessly complicated and intractable issue. Rather, it's a simple shortage of places to live. She believes that society has a choice: It can either pursue limited temporary solutions, such as shelters and camps, or it can attempt to solve the problem in a more permanent way, by offering housing vouchers for regular apartments and building more affordable housing.

Metzler has good things to say about Camp Hope. Still, she doesn't see encampments as helping with the larger problem. She worries that they divert attention away from the ultimate goal: permanent housing.

"Herding people into a camp doesn't address the issue of homelessness," Metzler said. "Ideally and ultimately and very possibly, housing would be the solution."

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