

# 'Like heaven on Earth': nonprofit envisions 'micro-home community' for Tulare County's homeless

*Visalia Times-Delta, by [Joshua Yeager](#), Oct. 21, 2019, 11:10 a.m. Pacific Time*

Hundreds of Tulare County residents now living on the streets — even those with addiction, mental health and behavioral challenges — could soon have a place to stay in a proposed "micro-home community."

That's the vision of a Tulare-based nonprofit Salt + Light.

The organization enlisted architect Alan Graham, the mastermind behind Community First! Village in Austin, Texas, which many advocates are holding up as a nationwide model for tackling homelessness.

Graham's model calls for the private sector and community partners to intervene, rather than wait for government agencies to step up to a "crisis" increasingly haranguing communities across the U.S.

"If we think it's going to take the government to come tuck us in and tell us everything's going to be OK, that's just not gonna happen," Graham said. "It takes a human being to start it."

Graham relayed his message to hundreds of Tulare County dignitaries as they chowed down on catered tacos and open-bar cocktails in Adrienne and Scott Hillman's backyard during the organization's official "launch party" last weekend.



*People line up to check out a 250-square-foot tiny home at the Salt + Light launch party on Oct. 12, 2019. The Tulare nonprofit wants to build a "micro-home community" for the county's homeless. (Photo: Joshua Yeager)*

The Hillman family is behind Tulare's J.D. Heiskell & Co., one of the country's largest grain producers, and is known for its philanthropic endeavors across the county.

Hillman said she hopes to continue that spirit with Salt + Light Village.

"It's a big project, but I believe it's our duty to come together to lift our brothers and sisters out of this crisis," she said.

Hillman previously sat on the board of Lighthouse Rescue Mission in Tulare and has volunteered with numerous homeless efforts. She first heard of Graham and his innovative project on a podcast in 2017 and has since visited the Austin community several times.

"It's as close to a place as heaven on earth as I've been," she said. "It really needs to be seen and experienced to be believed."

### **There are rules**

The master-planned community will encompass 20 acres and house more than 200 chronically homeless neighbors, according to its website.

Chronically homeless means any person who has lived on the streets for 12 months over a three-year period in Tulare County. That restriction, Hillman says, will prevent some from migrating to Tulare County to take advantage of services.

"People who are homeless are trying to survive. It's day-to-day. They aren't migrating town to town for services," she said.

According to the latest point-in-time count, there are 146 people experiencing homelessness in Tulare.

Countywide, there are 819 people experiencing homelessness.

"That feels like a number where we can still make a difference," Hillman said.

The homes will be a mix of 250-square-foot micro-homes with electricity but no plumbing and larger plumbed park homes. Shared bathroom and kitchen facilities are an unexpected benefit to many chronically homeless because they help reinforce a sense of community, she said.

Prospective residents will be vetted to ensure they aren't "a danger to themselves or others" before entering the community.

Residents will also have to follow the community's rules.

That means paying rent, between \$250 and \$450 each month, Hillman said. The Austin community of about 240 collects nearly \$50,000 in rent each month, according to Graham.

### **'Skin in the game'**

But Salt + Light will offer far more than just a home to its residents — and the community at large.

The proposed community will also host a number of "micro-enterprises" that will "provide opportunities for our formerly homeless neighbors to earn a dignified income."

"From a catering truck to a cinema, from a wood shop to metal shop, from a garden to an art space, from a marketplace to an inn, Salt + Light will offer multiple avenues for our neighbors to practice their God-given gifts and to learn a trade," Hillman said.

This holistic approach is why Community First! Village has succeeded where other efforts to address homelessness have failed, Graham added.

He believes that "catastrophic loss of family" is the biggest driver for homelessness and the primary reason some people remain on the streets.



"The single greatest cause of homelessness is a profound, catastrophic loss of family," Graham said. "Because of this, a house will never solve homelessness ...but the community will."

Under the Community First model, residents "buy into" their community. They are accountable to their neighborhoods and participate in the community through one of several micro-enterprises.

"Our residents pay rent, participate in the economy ...They have skin in the game," Graham said. "That's why it works."

### **Concerns unfounded**

The Community First! Village in Austin broke ground on an expansion that will double its size, adding 24 acres and 300 homes.

Initial concerns from neighbors that the village would promote crime or reduce property values have proved unfounded, Graham said.

Not a single crime was committed by Community First residents against neighbors, but seven crimes were "committed by neighbors against our folks."

"The only people we have to fear is you," he joked.

Local law enforcement agreed despite a few concerns.

Visalia Police Department fielded 7,443 transient-related calls for service in 2018, up 2,000, or 36%, over the previous year.

"I wouldn't necessarily be in support of a tiny home community (without services)," said Visalia Police Chief Jason Salazar. "However, I'm absolutely in support of what (Salt + Light) doing."

Providing homeless people with wrap-around services and not just housing is key to keeping people off the streets, he said.

"That is ultimately what all of us want," he said. "I think this could be beneficial."

Hillman said local businesses stand to benefit, as well.

"I hear a lot from businesses being disturbed by homeless," she said. "When they can get off the streets and begin healing, it benefits everyone."

### **'It takes a village to build a village'**

Could an initiative that achieved success in Austin, a famously progressive bastion in a red state, be replicated here in Tulare County, a conservative stronghold in a blue state?

Those who attended Saturday's launch event thought so.

"It doesn't feel cramped. I would live here," said Mary Randol, of Visalia, as she stretched her arms inside the tiny home. "I think it's exactly what we need: A sense of community and compassion."

Hillman said the project could break ground in as soon as two years, once an appropriate location is found. Salt + Light is "currently vetting" a few locations around the community. Site plans have already been drawn with different options, between 50 and 200 homes.

"We want to be really sensitive to the needs of the community at large, as well as our homeless community," she said. "We want to find a place where there aren't too many homes already."

Hillman was also hesitant to attach a specific cost to the project, adding that she hopes local businesses, philanthropists and grants will contribute "once our message gets out more."

The nonprofit wants to "shy away from" government dollars as much as possible.

"Our government does a lot of good — police, EMS, etc. — but love of our fellow man is not one of them," Graham said.

Hillman said she expects push-back regardless of where the community sets up. For the naysayers, she had this message:

"I hope people will try to leave their conceptions at the door. I'd love the opportunity to tell you how it works."

Graham echoed her plea.

"It takes a village to build a village, so if you want to build a village in Tulare County that makes a difference to the people of the community — on the streets and off — it's going to take all of us to make a difference," Graham said. "It's not going to take Sacramento, or city hall, or DC. We have to make it happen."

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