

Lead:

The COVID-19 pandemic and high inflation rates sent housing prices soaring, and cities around the country are experiencing a major housing crisis. In Austin, Texas, homelessness has increased by 20% this past year, and residents are scrambling to figure out how to respond. The Longhorn Newsroom's Caroline Hooten investigates some of the innovative ways Austin is trying to address the homeless crisis.

Script:

Blair 1: "They call me the mayor because I love the people out here..." (0:46-0:49 - Blair Racine Interview)

[Run ambi of people talking at the event under narration]

That's Blair Racine (RAH-SEEN). He lives in Community First Village - a neighborhood just outside of Austin in northeast Travis County. And his neighbors call Racine the mayor because he loves checking in with all the residents. Community First Village is different from other neighborhoods in the Austin suburbs: it's made up of 540 brightly colored tiny homes, no more than 200 square feet. The residents of this neighborhood were once chronically homeless. There are many reasons why people become homeless - mental illness, divorce, addiction or losing their job. Many people have support systems they can turn to for help, like family and friends. For people like Racine, that's not an option.

Blair 2: "Anyone can be homeless. If you don't have family, who do you turn to? This is our family." (0:38-0:53 - Blair Racine Interview)

[Ambi of people arriving at the event]

Today, I'm at the Village with a crowd of donors and partners to hear from Alan Graham. He's the founder of Mobile Loaves and Fishes - the non-profit that built Community First Village.

MLF has housed over 350 formerly homeless people in the tiny homes and RVs of the Village, and now, Graham announces its expansion.

Graham 1: “We’re gonna head with these two new phases to a community of 1900 homes.”

(4:24-4:40 - Alan Graham Speech)

Under this new plan, MLF will develop two neighborhoods of tiny homes for people experiencing homelessness. One of them will be across the street from the original village. The other will be on Burleson Road, near the Austin airport. MLF is partnering with another Austin non-profit, Foundation Communities, to build the neighborhood on Burleson Road.

Graham 2: “And how do we come together collectively in order to mitigate this pandemic that seems to be growing on our streets. This is gonna take nothing short of one of the greatest collaborative efforts on the planet.” (1:19-1:49 - Alan Graham Speech)

[Fade out ambi]

Community First Village is one piece of the huge puzzle to address homelessness in Austin. Jake Wegmann is an Associate Professor in Community and Regional Planning at The University of Texas. He thinks the most important thing Austin can do is build more permanent supportive housing. But many Austin residents do not want housing for the homeless built near their homes. Residents cite zoning laws that govern how people can use land to stop housing from being built near their properties. But Texas is unique: It only has zoning laws in the cities. This is why Graham built Community First Village outside the city limits.

Wegmann 1: “It didn’t really matter, the neighbors surrounding Community First Village if they didn’t like it... There was really nothing they could really do to stop it.” (27:22-27:32 -

Wegmann Interview)

Wegmann also thinks it's important for Austin to have more permanent supportive housing near the center of the city. This allows formerly homeless people to be closer to public transportation and amenities like the central library. One city in Texas that has seen a lot of success in addressing homelessness is Houston. They have reduced homelessness by about 63%.

Wegmann 2: "They kind of all got on the same page. That allowed them to be very competitive for reeling in grants from the federal government... and it seems like maybe there's a lesson there for Austin. (31:06-31:28 - Wegmann Interview)

The Coalition for the Homeless is the organization responsible for uniting the homeless response efforts of organizations and the government in Houston. Catherine Villarreal (VIYA-REE-AL) is the Director of Communications for the coalition. She thinks Houston is so successful because of this coordination, but also because of their housing first philosophy.

Villarreal 1: "People are given housing without any preconditions, so you don't have to get a job first or you don't have to get sober first (5:11-5:18)... How can you be expected to tackle all these really other big, difficult things that you're dealing with if you're not housed. (5:35-5:43 - Coalition for the Homeless Interview)

Houston's Coalition for the Homeless relies on federal funding to house people in apartments in the private rental market. They're able to do this because Houston has more affordable housing, which Austin sorely lacks. But there's hope. Austin passed Proposition A on Tuesday, which puts \$350 million dollars towards affordable housing for middle and low-income Austin residents. Government action combined with the work of MLF and other organizations could be the collaborative effort Austin needs to address homelessness.

I'm Caroline Hooten for the Longhorn Newsroom.