

# Why Shared Housing Offers Hope in the Fight Against Homelessness

*Change Well Project was thrilled to partner with Kris Freed, a nationally recognized expert in the field of homelessness and housing policy development, for a conversation on the power of implementing shared housing strategies. In this piece, Kris addresses why shared housing interventions can help diverse communities more effectively meet the needs of those experiencing homelessness—and offers insight on how to get started.*

“Those of us who have worked on the issue of homelessness—or experienced it ourselves—know that there’s only one way to end this crisis: provide enough safe, affordable housing for all. We realize that vision will take time, comprehensive support, and extraordinary resources. As we work toward that day, we need to leverage solutions that effectively use the housing stock that already exists in our communities to better meet the needs of those experiencing homelessness.

A shared housing strategy can serve as a powerful tool in the fight against homelessness. Shared housing interventions create intentional systems that connect individuals who are experiencing homelessness—and offer them the opportunity to share space and divide costs to secure safe, affordable housing. For years, the idea of investing in shared housing was largely ignored or dismissed; government program and housing advocates focused primarily on increasing access to individual occupancy and single-family homes. Today we are recognizing that most people experiencing homelessness are individuals without children or other dependents—and that single-occupancy living is not the only solution. Finally, the concept of shared housing—and tapping into existing housing units to house more individuals—is resonating with communities everywhere. Here are just a few of the reasons why:

## **Shared housing can help us house more individuals experiencing homelessness, economically and efficiently.**

It’s widely known that we do not have enough affordable housing. But digging deeper, the reality is that we don’t have enough smaller units—efficiencies and one-bedroom apartments—to accommodate the number of individuals who are experiencing homelessness. The expectation that nearly everyone would marry and have children has changed rapidly. When it comes to affordable housing, the result is that we often have more availability of single-family homes and larger apartments and barely any stock of the smaller homes we need. That creates a level of competition beyond what usually see in our housing market, causing prices to rise and become unattainable for someone living on a lower income.

This isn't just happening in urban areas on the coasts. Communities in West Virginia—one of the least expensive places in the country to live—are having similar struggles.

Shared housing allows us to tap into our existing stock of two- and three-bedroom apartments, making them available to split between individuals experiencing homelessness. By encouraging the sharing of available homes, housing programs can help house more people, more quickly, using fewer resources. It works economically while ultimately leading more individuals experiencing homelessness to a safe, permanent home.

### **Shared housing can be a form of supportive housing.**

For some of our most vulnerable, chronically homeless individuals, access to permanent supportive housing—which pairs a safe home with critical support services and case management—is vital. But for others, getting off the street and entering a shared housing situation can provide enough stability to be life changing. Living in a new environment, with new expectations for cohabitating, can be an important first step toward breaking free of the patterns that ultimately contributed to becoming homeless.

Living in a shared space can also provide a critical sense of community. We saw evidence of this during COVID, when many communities were standing up programs like Project Room Key, which opened hotel rooms to people experiencing homelessness. Rather than isolate themselves in their individual rooms, we consistently saw program participants spending time in kitchens and common areas, sharing meals and time together. All of us need that kind of community—particularly when we're facing a crisis.

From my own lived experience, I know shared housing can be a pathway from homelessness to stability. Though I grew up with privilege, I left home at 15 and lived on the street for nearly a decade. It was only when I connected with an older college professor who was willing to let me live in a trailer on her property that things began to change. That stability helped me find and keep a job, to enroll in community college, and then pursue undergraduate and graduate degrees. I know my privileged background contributed to the opportunities I received. But I also know that connecting with someone who helped me enter a shared housing environment completely changed the trajectory of my life—and it can do the same for others.

### **Shared housing can provide people experiencing homelessness with more autonomy in choosing how and where they live.**

In the homeless services world, traditionally the ultimate outcome has always been finding a client their own, individual home. As a result, finding shared housing for a client can feel less like success. There's a stigma that it doesn't stand for the same stability and independence—or that it can lead to overcrowding or forcing people into unhealthy conditions.

It's time to move past that mindset. If shared housing systems are implemented intentionally, they can get program participants into stable housing much more quickly—a critical step for those experiencing homelessness—while still providing choice around where and with whom they live. Shared housing interventions can be designed to assess what kinds of living environments will help someone thrive, and supply the essential components of autonomy, stability, and community. Beyond that, by dividing the costs of housing, shared housing makes it possible to live in better quality housing units and in more desirable neighborhoods. It's a strategy that helps individuals experiencing homelessness access safe housing more quickly and affordably, so that they can begin to rebuild other aspects of their lives.

## **We're already seeing communities with significant rates of homelessness begin to invest in shared housing.**

Many communities are starting to act on shared housing strategies, from Virginia to Seattle and many places in between. In Los Angeles, we worked with city leaders to develop a new pilot program for shared housing using an online matching system. Clients enter information on their personality and housing desires, and then are matched to people based on those criteria. They could take part in meet-and-greets with their matches—to choose their housemate, housing unit, and neighborhood based on their unique needs. In piloting that program, we saw real success in using that matching strategy; it's a tool that could be scaled to a variety of different communities in order to get people housed. The next step is to help states, counties, and local communities use these models to build out programs and systems to effectively serve those in urgent need of housing support.

It's exciting to see communities and national housing leaders exploring the prospect of shared housing. In the fight against homelessness, we need innovation more than ever. By investing in shared housing interventions, we have the opportunity to get more people who are experiencing homelessness into safe, affordable homes—to support them as they move from trauma and instability to security and wellness. Let's work together to make that critical step possible for everyone.

*Kris Freed is the Managing Partner at The Impact Group*