# Homelessness in Salt Lake: Taking Care of our Residents

Introduction

Over half a million people are homeless in the United States today. While Utah only accounts for a small percentage of that, it is still a major problem in a variety of ways. In Salt Lake County alone, 12,400 families live below the poverty line, roughly 7,500 people are homeless, and about 35 percent of those are families with children. Despite having much lower numbers than states like New York or California, that still represents thousands of struggling people who we as a state are failing. The least we can do is assure that people’s basic needs are met.

While there are programs and resources in place intended to help these individuals, most of them end up serving as a temporary fix rather than a permanent solution. These programs, along with other issues relating to and resulting from the homeless, cost the state of Utah $300 million in 2019 (tripled from the $100 million spent in 2017), without seeing much change in the number of homeless individuals—in fact, it has been slowly increasing since 2016 (McKellar, 2021). Clearly, these measures are not having the most efficient effect.

Whether you subscribe to the American bootstrap philosophy or not, it should not be a controversial statement that people’s most basic needs should be met, period. Poverty can be a vicious cycle, and many of us are only one disaster away from falling into struggles like this ourselves; wouldn’t we want to know that there are measures in place to get us securely back on our feet? As helpful as it is to be able to stay at a shelter for a night for a shower and hot meal, it only helps for that night. The problem is still there the next morning, and the day after that. A place to sleep is not a permanent address to receive mail at, or a place where your children feel safe, or a place to keep your possessions and feel confident that they will not be stolen or damaged. Shelters and soup kitchens are helpful emergency solutions in a crisis, but they still perpetuate the cycle that keeps people trapped in poverty and homelessness because they do not help to solve the root problems or causes that start these issues in the first place.

The Plan: Overview

This proposal encompasses, in essence, the preliminary foundation of a plan that will potentially serve as a permanent solution. To summarize, I propose that we build a community that not only serves as long-term housing that these individuals can call home, but helps to get them back to a stable place in life from which they can build and attain whatever goals they wish. Part of this project will be to find the cause of each individual’s homelessness, address and solve it, and help them to take steps towards stability and self-sufficiency. For example, if an individual is homeless because they were robbed of their wallet that contained all of their identifying documents (which are necessary to get a job, apply for an apartment or bank account, register a car, etc.) then once housing is secured, the proposed project/organization would assist this individual in obtaining replacement documents and then creating a plan for future career goals, relocation, etc., setting them up with temporary assistance such as SNAP while they work towards these goals and eventual self-sufficiency. This project could feasibly remove several hundred homeless individuals from the street permanently, immediately after its completion, and every year thereafter.

## Details

Step 1: Obtaining and Building the Property

The lot on the corner of State Street and 800 South is nearly 8 acres and was the home of a large Sears department store for many decades. It is centrally located downtown, near many resources and public transportation. This lot has been sitting empty for several years and has great potential for our intended project. It is currently listed at $8.8 million dollars, but may be open to negotiation due to the amount of time it has been sitting on the market. After the proposed purchase of this property, the old Sears building would need to be demolished and the debris removed, which is estimated to cost roughly $1.6 million. As this lot held a department store, it is already connected to city plumbing and power, which results in significant savings as opposed to what the cost would be if this project were to be built on a rural or undeveloped lot.

\*In order to save money during this phase, it would be beneficial to seek volunteers for the labor involved. There may be individuals in the homeless community who have experience in various construction fields, manual labor, plumbing, etc. Those supervising and overseeing the project development could come up with an exchange for these individuals volunteering their labor and time, such as discounted rent, first choice of which unit they want when the buildings are finished, etc. We could also seek to partner with ReStore for some of the building materials when possible, and/or various construction or contracting companies who may be willing to donate unwanted materials or other assistance. Local churches, particularly missionaries, may be interested in contributing to the unskilled labor, and we can explore the option of partnering with the court system or juvenile corrections to offer this opportunity as a way to complete community service hours.

Once the lot has been cleared, the next step would be to build. In developing this proposal I selected two economic and cost-efficient examples of floorplans (see Figure 1 and Figure 2). Both would be doubled vertically (stacked on top, so double the number of stories/units). Figure 1 would be 8 stories with 108 total units- 32 each of 1 bedroom, 2 bedroom, and 3 bedroom apartments. It would cost roughly $8 million to build. Figure 2 would be 6 stories with a total of 48 units of 2 bedrooms each, costing about $3.6 million to build. Theoretically, Figure 1 would be a building for women, couples, and families; Figure 2 could be for men only. This would be for the same reasons that some of the shelters are segregated as such (domestic violence issues, sex offenders, etc.).

On the property would also be a sort of community center, in which there would be offices for case managers and other staff overseeing the project, a kitchen and dining hall, a childcare center, laundry facilities, classrooms, perhaps a computer lab and gym. A floor plan has not been created for this building yet, so the cost cannot yet be determined. As this project proposal is preliminary, it is very open to suggestions. There could also be more buildings added; there is plenty of space on this lot.

Step 2: Living Arrangements and resident life

Each bedroom in an apartment can house 2 roommates, who would have discounted rent if they agree to room with another resident. There would also be the option for an individual, couple, or family to rent the entire apartment if they need or wish. The living arrangements are open to further discussion and stipulations, as we want to avoid conflict between roommates, keep families together, but also maximize the usage of space.

As these residents were homeless up to this point and therefore not in a position to be traditional tenants paying market value (not to mention the obscene rise in rental housing costs in recent years), this will of course be an affordable apartment community, and one of the first steps would be to get our community approved to accept housing assistance and then quickly arrange for the project and residents applying for it to be on an expedited case list for housing assistance; the waiting list can be long, but these individuals are urgent cases in a special venture, so perhaps a case worker can be assigned solely to applications from prospective residents of our project. This would enable the project to very quickly remove a significant portion of Salt Lake’s homeless individuals from the streets, as well as getting a quick start on investment return via housing payments.

During this phase it would also be beneficial to create set rules and policies for tenants regarding what will and will not be tolerable behavior and allow them to continue living there. We will do our best to make arrangements and account for substance abuse and mental health problems (it is worth discussing the possibility of hiring an on-call medical professional who comes periodically to take care of residents and could greatly remedy these issues) and to be understanding of the unique backgrounds from which these individuals are coming, but being a danger or significant nuisance to other residents needs to result in consequential actions. For this project to succeed, the residents must *want* to live there and be satisfied with the lifestyle and experience it affords them. This would also be the time to secure case management and administrative staff, and potentially speak with some residents about volunteering for positions as security guards, maintenance, janitorial, kitchen coordination, childcare (as a service for residents), and other positions for the property in similar exchange-type arrangements as the aforementioned laborers. At this stage, the project management team should also begin planning the finer details of resident life, like activities and classes, laundry hours, guest and pet policies, etc.

Once on our way to securing tenants, we should begin working towards having a diverse pool of resources for them. Some of the possibilities that would be extremely helpful:

* Partnerships with establishments like Goodwill, Deseret Industries, and Savers to help provide our residents with the basic needs of clothing and furniture
* Contacts at Workforce Services to help residents secure temporary assistance and find job training/jobs
* Arrangements with local businesses to receive donations of items like newly/almost expired (but still consumable) food that would otherwise be thrown away, closeout clearance items like clothes and toiletries, and hygiene products
* Vouchers or complimentary passes for public transportation
* Fast access to mental health and addiction recovery services
* Visits from cosmetology or barber school students to give haircuts/beard trims to residents regularly
* Volunteers to teach beneficial classes like basic computer skills, parenting/childcare, CPR, food handler certification, and other marketable qualifications

Once stable, residents can meet with their assigned case manager and create a plan with goals to work towards in terms of their self-sufficiency. Some residents may wish to live there indefinitely, particularly if they are elderly or disabled and their employment/future prospects are limited as such. Others, like families with children, may wish to work towards purchasing a home or moving to another state closer to family, and their plan will be made accordingly. The goal is for individuals to remain living in the community until they are stable and independent, and then they may move on to other things if they wish to and are confidently, comfortably able to.

## Conclusion

This plan, while it is a big and costly undertaking, still only costs a small fraction of what is currently being spent on homelessness in Utah and may very well be the key factor in completely turning around these individuals’ lives. Having the power to get so many people back on their feet and change their lives for the better, from terrifying and stressful to confident and optimistic, is a huge responsibility that I like to think we know the weight and obligation of. If managed correctly, this could very well make Utah a state with no homelessness within just a few short years, which not only saves millions of dollars but creates newly fulfilling lives of productive members of society who enter the workforce and contribute to the local economy. When put in such a simple, efficient, streamlined way, how could we not undertake this project?

References

McKellar, K. (2021, November 16). *Utah homeless spending*. Deseret News. Retrieved May 2022, from https://www.deseret.com/utah/2021/11/16/22785513/audit-utah-homelessness-spending-rose-but-problems-continue-to-grow-salt-lake-city-homeless

*Summary data for Salt Lake County*. Healthy Salt Lake. (2022, March). Retrieved May 4, 2022, from https://www.healthysaltlake.org/index.php?module=DemographicData&controller=index&action=index

*Utah homelessness statistics*. US Interagency Council on Homelessness. (n.d.). Retrieved May 2022, from https://www.usich.gov/homelessness-statistics/ut/