

Plan for tiny house village a first for Rochester, Monroe County



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A concrete barricade cuts across the dead-end road that is Clarence Park.

Two street lights and a patch of pavement on the other side are all that is left of what years ago was a tightly packed cul-de-sac of two-story houses.

The one-acre, city-owned lot, sandwiched into the Edgerton neighborhood north of downtown, has become a dumping ground. The plan is to turn it into a village — building the first tiny houses in the area to house the homeless or those at risk of becoming so.

A proposal being drafted by REACH Advocacy shows nine to 12 units, a mix of single-family and duplexes — insulated and on permanent foundations — each with a kitchen, bathroom, and living/sleeping area, encapsulated in a 16-by-24 foot space.

"Bigger than a tent and a car but smaller than a lot of peoples living rooms," said Marcia Reaver, project manager for REACH Tiny Home Village.



Nothing is official. A city spokeswoman casts the concept as "hypothetical." But momentum is building, with an eye toward starting construction in spring 2023.

"The goal is — this is a step out of homelessness," Reaver said. "It is not a step into acquiring a high-paying job and wealth, it's a step toward getting there."

REACH Advocacy works with the homeless and has operated winter shelters in the city since 2015. The village concept, developed in consultation with their residents and neighbors, is envisioned to be entirely grant and donation-funded.

Social work, medical, dental, and behavioral health services would be available, and the on-site manager would be trained in trauma-informed care. REACH is partnering with other agencies on life and job skills training, and with Rochester Housing Authority to secure rental assistance. City Roots Land Trust would own the land. Catholic Family Center's YouthBuild and Edison

Tech students would be enlisted to help build the village, giving them training in construction skills.

This would be permanent housing, with no time limit on how long a person could stay. But the intent is to fill a need for transitional housing and that people will move to an apartment or other, larger housing option in time.

Having a community is critical, officials said, so there will be group meetings and community meals. So too is giving people their private space.



Qualifying residents would undergo a background check and screening process.

"What I would hope out of (the tiny home village) is it can be seen as a pilot, that these small communities can exist," said REACH co-chairperson Andy Carey.

He also is a social worker and co-founder of MC Collaborative, which would provide case management for the village.

"We are in such an amazing situation now with the amount of evictions, the amount of homelessness," he continued. "A lot of these things are life preservers now."

In what seems an ever-deeper and turbulent ocean.

'It was hell'



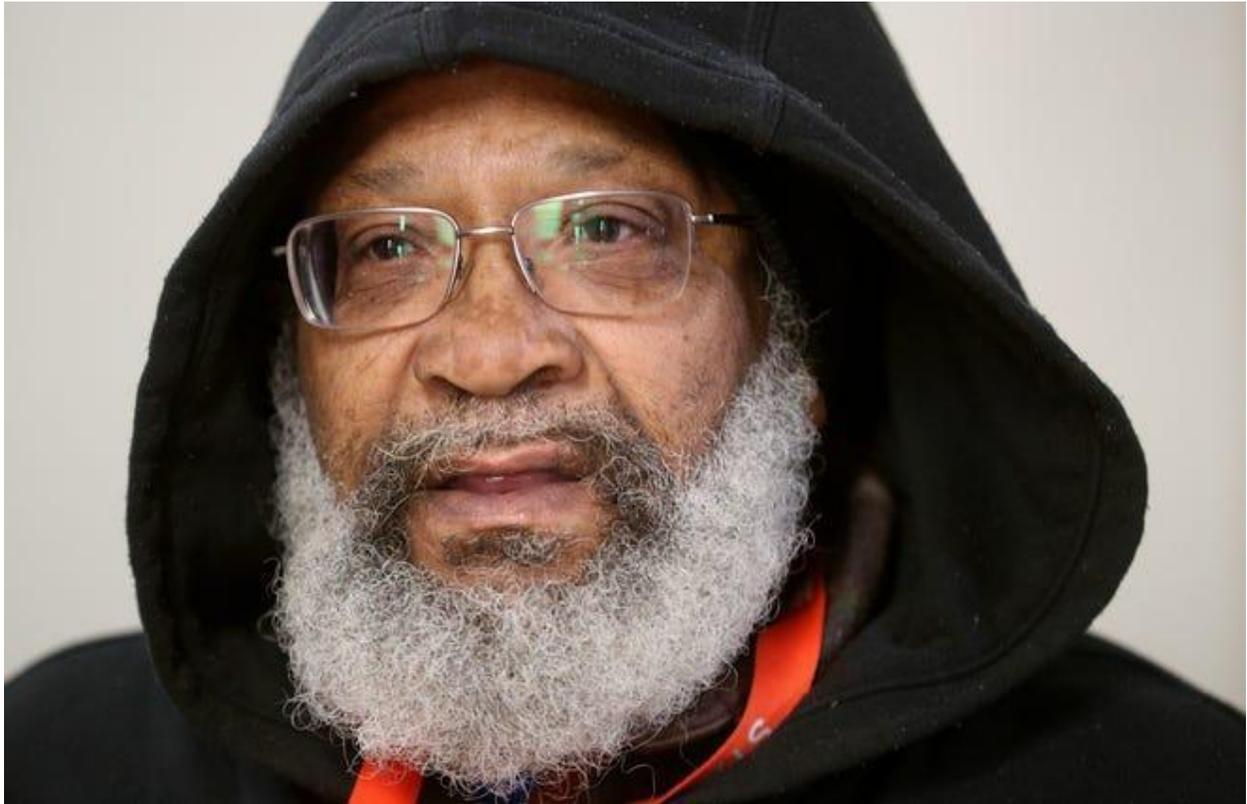
A small suitcase sat on the bed but most of David Dorch's clothes still were in the cabinet. Dorch was moving — out of one homeless shelter, into another.

"After I get myself together, I'm going to get an apartment," the 56-year-old said.

That means getting a job, which Dorch hasn't been able to do since arriving here in January. He came up from North Carolina when his aunt died in Buffalo. Initially, he stayed with a friend here in town, but he soon landed at the Open Door Mission before learning about REACH.

That brought him to the winter shelter in an old church rectory on West Main: "One of the best places I ever stayed," he said.

The program shut down for the season last week. So Dorch packed up. "You just have to learn how to survive with it," he said of the instability. "It was hell," said Nehemiah Yisreal, 60, describing the three-and-a-half months he and his wife were homeless and in a shelter last fall.



They were living in a house on Genesee Street that got sold, forcing them to move. He gets disability benefits, but they were unable to find an affordable rental. Staying in a shelter meant sleeping in separate quarters, and vacating each morning then returning at night.

In the mix were "a lot of mental health people that's not getting treated," he said. "Then a lot of people just falling through the cracks with no help. ... I've never seen it on that level."

Now with an apartment and stability again, he has been volunteering at the REACH shelter, explaining: "I've been where they're at. ... People don't understand, they could be here today, and back there tomorrow."

As the number of eviction filings rises, concern grows

There have been 1,630 new filings for residential evictions in Rochester since a state moratorium expired on Jan.15. More than half came in the past 45 days. Most remain pending.

All this volatility is fueling fears that more people will fall into homelessness. Mayor Malik Evans convened a task force on housing quality and stability, with recommendations expected this month. The number of homeless locally had been holding steady of late but has increased from a decade ago, particularly among those not living in shelters, records show. This while homelessness has decreased nationally.

On a given night in 2020, more than 800 people were homeless in Rochester and Monroe County, according to the National Alliance to End Homelessness.

Those are the most recent and complete numbers available and reflect pre-COVID levels.

The alliance's analysis is based on federal data that, because of the pandemic, was limited in 2021 only to those in shelters. That report showed improvement, which could be attributable to resources and moratoriums aimed at stabilizing housing conditions nationwide, or to people avoiding shelters for fear of contracting COVID.

Tiny houses protect human dignity, advocate says



The pandemic laid bare the precarity and inequities of housing here and across the nation. That, in turn, raised awareness, translating to increased government spending.

COVID also demanded individual over congregate housing options for the homeless. And there are anecdotal claims here and elsewhere that residents' mental health benefited as a result.

Other communities like Syracuse and Ithaca have built tiny houses for the homeless, but on scattered sites or outside the city. What REACH is proposing — a close-in, permanent, supportive community — is more in line with the model that the National Alliance to End Homelessness is advocating.

"That to us is what an answer to homelessness should look like," said Steve Berg, vice president of programs and policy for the alliance, speaking generally of the key areas. "The solution to homelessness is housing."

The county has yet to see any tiny house projects formally proposed, officials said.

Patrick Tobin is among the volunteer industry experts to have joined the REACH team in the past year. A former vice president with Christa Construction, his notable local projects include The Sagamore on East, a high-end condominium development that helped lead off downtown's revitalization.

He sees tiny houses as a viable housing option for Rochester, looking more broadly with the city's desire to offer more housing choices and do something with its abundance of vacant lots.

For the homeless, tiny houses are a safe and logical choice where "you have your own place, it's not too much," Tobin said. "We don't really see this as being a permanent home for anybody."

Yet he added: "They are really amazingly wonderful."

Tobin cautions that, while a tiny house might require less to maintain, it is surprisingly not that much cheaper to build.

Per unit costs are \$100,000 with kitchens and bathrooms being the big cost drivers in housing construction, he said. Subsidies are needed to achieve affordability. Initially, Carey wasn't a fan, given the high cost and the low number of people served.

"Then I realized, there are a lot of people still out on the street, not coming in," he said, and the past two winters showed the benefit of private living spaces. "It's amazing how much better the mental health situation is (for those individuals).

"It's just more dignified to house people that way."

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