

Housing First?

A SALT LAKE SOLUTION
COULD WORK IN EUGENE

By Camilla Mortensen

Walk through downtown Eugene and you'll see shops, restaurants, bars, kids on bikes, artists, business people, random pedestrians ... and part of this quirky city scene is an assortment of panhandlers, travelers and unhoused residents not unlike those seen in downtowns across America.

Walk through downtown Salt Lake City and it feels a bit like Disneyland. Weirdly clean, it too has bars, restaurants and shops. The downtown mall, City Creek Center, has a manufactured creek running charmingly through its tidy, paved center.

And while it has its share of Mormons on mission (more accurately, members of the Church of Latter Day Saints) in the requisite white shirts and dark ties, it also has a typical scene of shoppers and strollers as well as people sleeping on benches and sitting on planters.

It's not just SLC's cleaner-than-clean downtown façade that made Utah's unhoused stand out to me. I was surprised because Salt Lake City, as I read in several articles before traveling there in July, has figured out the solution to homelessness.

But as I wandered from my hotel in search of coffee (which, like alcohol, is easily purchased in SLC despite rumors that the church forbids it) there were indeed homeless people, panhandling, riding mass transit and generally doing what the unhoused do in every city — surviving.

I met up with a local alternative news weekly reporter who quirked an eyebrow at me when I told him I had come to see Salt Lake City's solution to homelessness.

It didn't seem that odd a request. I'd read the story in *Mother Jones* and *The New Yorker*, seen the piece on NationSwell. *The Daily Show* even did a segment in January with correspondent Hasan Minhaj sitting down with Lloyd Pendleton, who had been the director of the Utah Homeless Task Force, to discuss (tongue in cheek on Minhaj's part) how SLC had reduced its chronically homeless population by 72 percent.

We hopped on the TRAX, Salt Lake's light rail, which is free downtown and popular with the housed and unhoused alike in the area. We hopped off not far from downtown, near a sparsely populated mall. A short walk later, we were heading down the street toward The Road Home's Salt Lake Community Shelter and a cluster of other homeless services.

We walked through the throng of people waiting on the sidewalk for the day shelter to open. Not far from where drug dealers were blatantly peddling their wares stood families with small children in strollers, hoping for aid.

A young woman sitting on the sidewalk, looking exhausted, maybe a little spaced out, told us she comes to the shelter for food, a shower and a place to rest. A police officer going through the belongings of someone whose car was parked on the street was largely ignored by the rest of the 50 or so people scattered around the homeless services.

Given the scene outside, I wasn't too surprised when, arriving at the front desk and asking the receptionist if I could talk to someone about how Salt Lake City had solved the "homeless problem," she said: "How we did what?"

Her tone of shock and skeptical glare spoke volumes.

Yet, to a certain extent, Salt Lake City *has* solved a significant portion of the homeless issue in a way that other cities haven't. The solution is simple and relatively inexpensive: Housing First. Giving the homeless a place to live; not temporary shelters, giving them homes.

But as the staff of The Road Home, a shelter with around 800 beds, will tell you, SLC has not eradicated homelessness. Utah serves as both a model and a reminder for Eugene. The city has made a huge step in the right direction, and it's one that Lane County can emulate — if this area, like Salt Lake, can collaborate on large-scale solutions and, just as importantly, keep moving forward.

The Salt Lake Solution

In that way the internet has of exaggerating things or getting details just wrong enough to make them better or worse than they really are, the news that began to float around social media last fall and into the winter was that Utah, the red state that has gifted the world with Mitt Romney and execution by firing squad, had somehow solved homelessness.

The Daily Show jumped on that news, as it does any news that sounds a bit odd or over the top, like two-headed fish or the BP oil spill. Hasan Minhaj interviewed Lloyd Pendleton, who has since retired from the state of Utah but still speaks and consults on homeless issues.

After pointing out the ridiculous things cities have done to discourage the unsheltered from being visible — from fining them for sleeping outdoors to arresting them for sitting down — the satirical segment says: "Salt Lake City has taken the next step, by removing homeless people from the streets altogether," then shows Minhaj fruitlessly and ironically hunting for people who might be living in cardboard boxes.

"Did you hide them underground?" he asks Pendleton. "Did you convert them from Mormon to gay?"

No. Nor from gay to Mormon either, Pendleton deadpans.

So how did they do it?

"We gave homes to the homeless. Yes, it's simple. You give them housing, and it ends homelessness," Pendleton says.

His response on *The Daily Show* is deadpan, but he's not at all kidding. Since 2005, Utah has reduced the numbers of the chronically homeless by 72 percent, according to the state's 2014 Comprehensive Report on Homelessness, and not gone broke doing it, by providing housing.

Providing housing to the homeless actually means cities spend less money.

Utah has a 10-year plan to end chronic and veteran homelessness by the end of 2015, and it's doing this by using a "Housing First" model. Housing First is, quite simply, the effort to focus on quickly providing permanent housing, not temporary shelter, to those experiencing homelessness, and then providing the needed services. It's the opposite of the typical model, which demands people who might be mentally ill or addicted first go through recovery, get dry or get treatment before "earning" shelter.

Eugene really doesn't have true Housing First, but we could, and many homeless advocates want it. In some ways, the temporary camps such as Whoville, which have been shuffled around the city, as well as the less temporary Opportunity Village Eugene (OVE), are a step in that direction. But while those solutions, as well as shelters such as the Eugene Mission, provide temporary or even longer-term shelter, they are not Housing First. Places such as OVE and Emerald Village Eugene (SquareOne Villages) require that residents not use alcohol or illegal drugs.

The federal government defines as chronically homeless any unaccompanied person who has been unhoused for 12 months or for four times in the previous three years and has some other existing condition such as mental illness or drug addiction, according to Dan Bryant. Bryant is pastor at Eugene's First Christian Church and is executive director of SquareOne Villages. Then there are the situationally homeless, Bryant says, individuals or a family that might be homeless for six months or nine months.

It's the situationally homeless that have been the focus of Bryant's work. "Frankly, I'm focused on the other end,