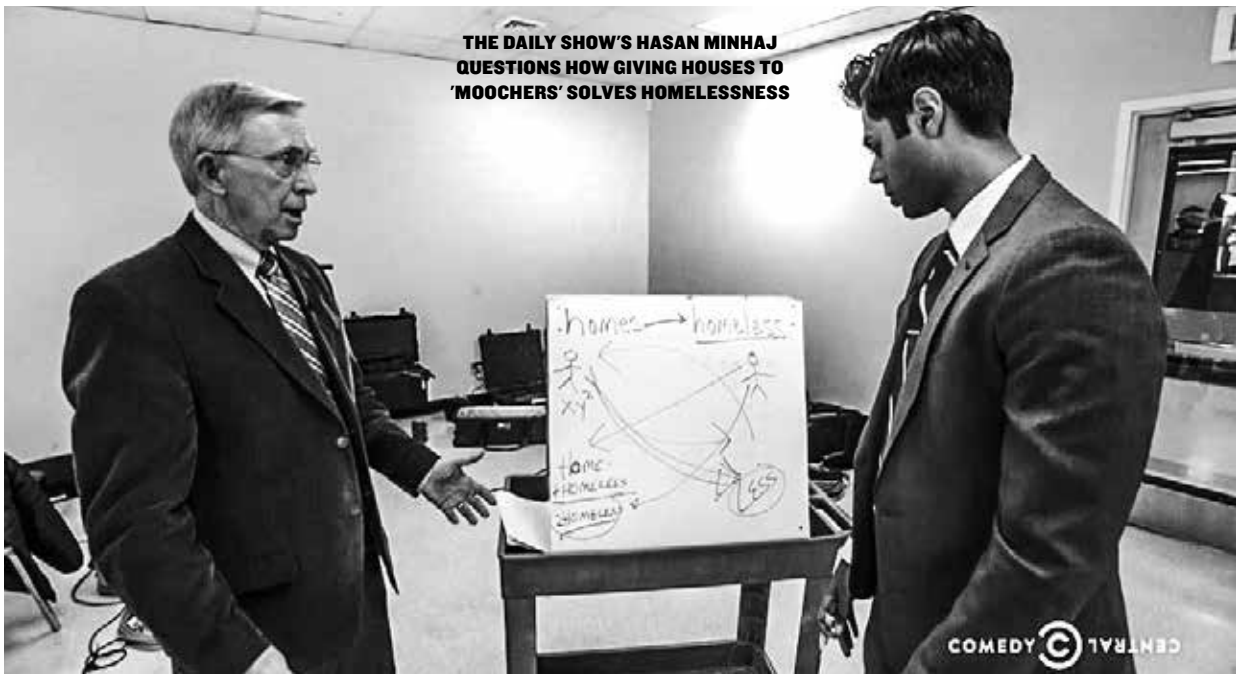




higher functioning, not frequent flyers,” he says. “Folks who just need a little bit of help.”

Transitional housing programs such as SquareOne Villages' tiny houses are innovative, effective and have gotten their share of national attention, too. ShelterCare's The Inside Program has provided Housing First-type transitional homes and case management for the mentally ill since 2006. But as anyone who lives in Eugene knows, particularly those who live under bridges or in camps alongside rivers, the innovations have not “solved” homelessness.

Meanwhile in Utah, Pendleton is enthusiastic at the steps the large-scale implementation of the Housing First model has made to solve the problem — veteran homelessness is basically at a functional zero, he says. According to Pendleton, the key to the solution is collaboration as well as buy-in from groups and politicians. He says SLC was part of a 2003 federal plan to end chronic homelessness involving a pilot project in 11 cities. The Collaborative Initiative to Help End Chronic Homelessness was a \$35-million program for housing and support services that combined Housing and Urban Development funds with other resources.

Utah learned about the Housing First program in New York City, but Pendleton says what works in NYC doesn't necessarily fly in Utah, so a pilot Housing First program was established in Salt Lake. He says the project, Sunrise Metro, took on 17 challenging chronically homeless people, and SLC learned “if we can house them, we can house anybody.” He says that nationwide, Housing First projects show 85 percent of people are still housed after 12 months.

“We became believers,” Pendleton says. It was a “huge paradigm shift, and we did it with our own people.” Housing First soon had buy-in at all levels and across political lines in Utah, and that, Pendleton says, made it possible.

Why Housing First?

But what good does it do to put homeless people in homes if they still have the problems that led to them being unhoused in the first place? Financially it makes sense, Pendleton says. He estimates it costs \$10,000 to \$12,000 to house a chronically homeless person, but it costs the government \$20,000 to deal with them on the street and up to \$40,000 in other cities.

Transitional shelters, in the long run, are not cost effective if the homeless spend the whole time there, Pendleton says. If one chronically homeless person gets a bed, then 11 other situationally homeless people can use that bed the chronic person has been taking up. According to the state of Utah's statistics, 3.9 percent of Utah's homeless are considered chronically homeless or experience homelessness for long periods of time, but the chronically homeless take up a disproportionately large share of shelter beds and services.

Bryant says that much higher on-the-street cost has to do with the many contacts the unhoused have with public health and police — trips to the emergency room and to jail.

But, he cautions, Housing First programs still need to be supplemented with services, and funding is always an issue.

Utah repurposed existing funding when it got under way with Housing First. Pendleton says, “I was not willing to go say, ‘Give me \$10 million to implement this new idea.’” But once the program showed success, it got champions at high levels and even outside donors, in addition to pulling from federal, state and local funding.

Back at The Road Home, the nonprofit's executive director Matt Minkevitch says while housing the chronically homeless has made a difference, the work is not done. “Candidly, I got concerned when I started sensing members of our coalition doing a victory dance,” he says.

“We've made some measurable progress,” Minkevitch tells *EW*. “Collaborations have been good. We had a collective focus,” with groups from government officials to housing authorities “agreeing that we really wanted to make a significant impact on those who were living in the shelter as opposed to brief episodes of homelessness.”



But, he says, there is still much to learn, and homeless advocates are only scratching the surface. While tremendous progress has been made, he says the 800-bed Road Home shelter “is putting out mats tonight” for people to sleep on. Right now, the homeless issue in SLC is stalled, Minkevitch says.

“The part that makes it all the more energizing, frustrating and encouraging is we've done this,” he says. “The most challenging people I've known for two decades, they are in housing, they heal, they do better. Do they go 12-step and become completely sober?” he asks. “No, but there's a moderation in behavior.”

Housing First is “incredibly encouraging, but we haven't scaled it up, and we need to step it up. Urban America needs to do this,” Minkevitch says.

He's looking at homeless families and at an economic situation and a housing situation that is leaving too many people on the edge. Minkevitch says that just down the street from the shelter, public funding is going to put in a

high-end project that will have apartments for rent at \$1,000 per month, the kind of places people at The Road Home might aspire to, but right now, or maybe forever, are out of their reach.

“We are creating the kind of environment where someone living in poverty is in constant peril of homelessness,” he says. For people at or below the federal poverty line for whom just getting their hours cut at work could mean losing their homes: “If they are not making \$15 an hour, they can't afford an apartment in Salt Lake City. Am I not describing a lot of cities across America?”

Our tax credits are not going to create housing for those people on the edge, Minkevitch says.

Where to go from here

Looking at Eugene, the city's Multi-Unit Property Tax Exemption has given 10-year tax breaks to higher-end apartments and student housing. But a recent Eugene City Council decision means that developers are now required to give 10 percent of the MUPTE exemption to a city fund dedicated for affordable housing, or developers can designate a third of the units in the development at affordable rents.

But even with innovative projects such as SquareOne Villages and various Eugene Safe Spot rest stops, Eugene could be doing more, both for the chronically homeless as well as for the situationally homeless and those on the edge. Salt Lake is getting better, Minkevitch says, but also needs to do more. He tells me since I was there only last month a new police officer in the area has cracked down on the drug dealing outside the shelter.

Jacob Fox of the Housing and Community Services Agency of Lane County (HACSA) says the agency provides Section 8 (housing vouchers) and public housing for 5,000 households in Lane County. A significant number of those people are coming out of homelessness or transitional housing. Residents can use alcohol, but not illegal drugs, he says.

Fox is on Lane County's Poverty and Homelessness Board that he says is “currently conducting due diligence to see if Housing First makes sense for our community.” He says the board is a committed group of individuals who are thinking out of the box, and that the group will know by the first quarter of 2016 if it will attempt to develop or acquire a 50-unit building that would serve the chronically homeless. Meetings of the board are open to the public.

On the state level, Bryant says that there was a Housing First bill in the Oregon Legislature this past session, House Bill 3420. The bill didn't make it out of committee, but it would have established Housing First pilot programs in Eugene and Albany. Rep. Val Hoyle (D-West Eugene and Junction City) was one of the sponsors, and Bryant says the goal is to “restart and reshape and get something ready for short session in 2016.”

According to Pendleton, it's that sort of thinking and collaboration, as well as buy-in from officials and funders at all levels, that makes Housing First work. Housing First needs a “champion,” he says. “The mayor or a county commissioner needs to say, ‘This is a priority, and I'm making this a commitment.’”

He adds: “It can be done. We know the solution; it's housing. You just need to make the commitment.”

A recent filing by the federal Department of Justice in a Boise, Idaho case may also give hope to the impetus to provide homes for the unsheltered not criminalize those who live on the streets. The filing says:

“... when adequate shelter space does not exist, there is no meaningful distinction between the status of being homeless and the conduct of sleeping in public. Sleeping is a life-sustaining activity — i.e., it must occur at some time in some place. If a person literally has nowhere else to go, then enforcement of the anti-camping ordinance against that person criminalizes her for being homeless.”

And if Housing First works in Lane County, and we put forth a big, collaborative effort to free up shelter space and keep families at the edge of poverty out of homelessness while supporting those who are situationally homeless as well as those on the fringes through innovative programs, then, finally, we might be closer to “solving the homeless problem.” ■