

NEWS

BY MEERAH POWELL



OCCUPODS, ROLL OUT!

Local nonprofit Burrito Brigade is partnering with Occupod Action! — a mobile homeless shelter project

An Occupod is a small, wooden, mobile, weather-resistant sleeping shelter. You might have spotted a few at the former butterfly lot protest camp. The little snail-shaped pods are a response to the need to shelter local homeless people.

Advocates for the unhoused and others have been continuously disappointed with Eugene's handling of its homeless population. Or more precisely, they are disappointed with the city's lack of enthusiasm for helping those who lack shelter.

But one thing Eugene does have is a strong community of homeless advocates and activists working to care for those most in need.

The creator of Occupod Action! is one of those crucial activists.

The Occupod's designer and main builder asked to remain anonymous, as he has received hate mail from local business owners about "providing a shanty town in Eugene." He and his build partner have continued on, though, recently finishing their 11th Occupod.

Occupod's designer says he created the first Occupod in late August of this year. He also set up the website Occupod.org with detailed instructions on constructing the mobile shelters.

"They cost \$75 each to build new," he says.

Given his desire for anonymity, the Occupod's designer has not been able to publicly promote Occupod. Last weekend, that problem was solved when local nonprofit Burrito Brigade partnered with Occupod operations.

Burrito Brigade, an organization that makes burritos for the hungry each week, is beginning to accept donations for Occupod Action! and publicly supporting the project.

"It kind of felt like a natural partnership because what they're doing and what we're doing kind of go hand in hand," says Jennifer Denson, Burrito Brigade's board president. "We want to support any efforts for the unhoused, whatever they may be."

Occupod's designer says he's excited for the partnership and the chance for more community engagement in the creation of Occupods — eventually, he hopes, in the form of community build parties.

"It would take me a year to build a hundred Occupods, whereas the community can do that in a weekend," he says. "The Occupod Action! idea is to not receive donations and

have me personally build, but to persuade community folks to get active in a solution and build one themselves to serve someone they know in need."

Occupod's designer was inspired by Occupy — the socio-economic movement that took Eugene, the nation and the world by storm in 2011. It drew attention to the plight of the unhoused in Eugene and stimulated the formation of such local organizations as Occupy Medical.

"The Occupy movement provided an essential civil service that directly combated state-sponsored economic inequality," the designer says. "Occupods are a direct confrontation on the lack of humanitarian action by every city, state, county and federal official. The true need by the greater society starts with sleep and privacy."

Further impetus comes from people here in the community.

"Additional inspiration was born through acknowledgement that so many of our neighbors needs are being unmet. Winter is on its way, and we need more housing options," the designer says. "We are tired of complacency. We are tired of waiting on the city to do something, someday. We believe that all people deserve shelter, regardless of circumstance, so we built shelters."

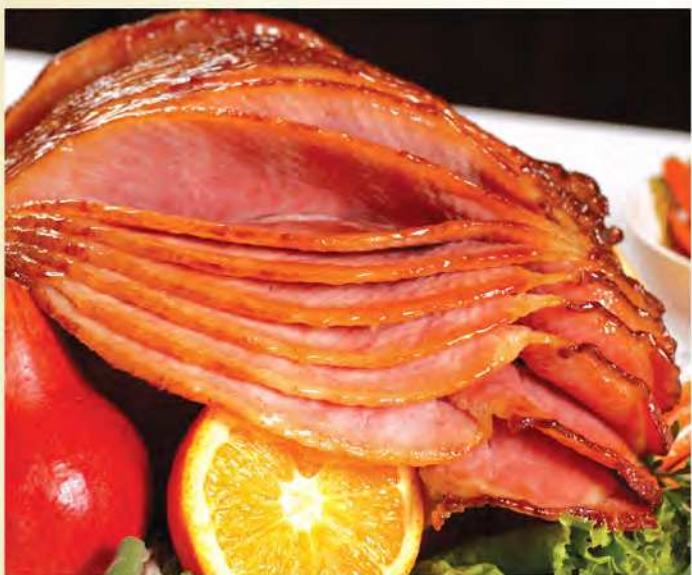
Most recently, the city canceled plans for a temporary downtown shelter at the vacant City Hall lot.

"We don't have to wait for permission to help heal a sick society," the designer says. "We have power to make changes. We need to follow it up with direct action."

Burrito Brigade's Denson says because the partnership is so new, no immediate events are planned around the Occupods. "We're trying to see how the current Occupods do and then go from there," she says.

Occupod's designer hopes that society won't need structures like Occupods "once communities advance into caring about their unhoused neighbors enough to demand or create permanent, accessible, affordable housing solutions."

Until then, he says, people need to take things into their own hands to help the homeless community. ■



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