

Episode 1: Community Plan to End Homelessness

Welcome to Dwellings, a podcast from the City of San José Housing Department, where we talk with experts about ending homelessness, building affordable housing, and exploring housing policies at the city and state level. I'm your host Alli Rico.

On today's episode, I'm joined by Jennifer Loving, CEO of Destination Home; and Lee Clark, Lived Experience Advisory Board Coordinator, to talk about Santa Clara County's Community Plan to End Homelessness.

Alli Rico (AR): So welcome Jen and Lee to the podcast. Thanks again for joining me. Um, can you both talk a little bit about what Destination Home is?

Jennifer Loving (JL): 12 years ago now through a big effort with, uh, the mayor of San José at the time, Mayor Reed and, uh, someone on the Board of Supervisors, Supervisor Don Gage, and they called for a, uh, big community-wide like blue ribbon commission, you know, like the task forces that we see happen from time to time. And the whole premise of the, of the blue ribbon commission was to, uh, shift from managing homelessness to ending it. Uh, they said they needed a public private partnership. That would be the vehicle to bring the community together, to execute these strategies. And they called it Destination Home. So I joined Destination Home in 2010 and, uh, uh, really was, was feeling like if we were going to move the needle, we had to have a collective effort that was demonstrating, um, the results that we could end homelessness, that we could prove it to the community and that we would have the data to kind of back it up. Destination Home at its heart is a public private partnership that is, uh, that was founded to convene the community around strategies to end and prevent homelessness. And, and so it's taken on a lot of different forms over the years.

AR: Lee, do you also want to give a little overview of what you do for Destination Home?

Lee Clark (LC): Yeah. What I do is I'm the food distribution coordinator in, for lived experience. I was out there on the street for a while. I was homeless for a while. So I have, I guess you'd say insight, input or information on that. And, um, I go out four times a week to encampments, probably about eight or nine encampments, you know, to feed the unhoused, you know? Um, and also I try to do some outreach to I'm trying to get people to get into shelters. A lot of them, for some reason, they don't want to go. You know, um, also, uh, I report some of the needs back to Destination Home and the Office of Supportive Housing, like, um, porta-potties, um, dumpsters, they have dumpsters out there now, you know. They're doing a lot more; porta-potties, dumpsters, hand washing stations.

LC: We help with clothes, you know, some individuals out there really need clothes, tents, you know. We're doing a lot, you know, this is, uh, not just me and Destination Home, some other organizations. Ff course, Destination Home, I can vouch for, is doing a lot to see to the needs of the unhoused. So my role is expanding and that's a good thing because I want to do a little more outreach to be able to reach those out there. And, uh, one of my main things I would like to do is get as many people into shelters until they can be housed as I can, because I think that's a big part of it.

JL: The, the way that, that you tackle big crises, big social issues that don't have an owner; water, food, housing, right? There's not like one entity that is controlling everything. Right? And so, uh, the, the way that, that has made sense to us that we started in 2011 and I would say, has been the most gratifying strategy that I've ever been a part of is using something called collective impact. So what that means is there are...in large scale social issues, there are problems that doesn't have a discreet owner, but it has people that have lots of, lots of different entities have responsibility. The City of San José has responsibility for homelessness as it relates to camps and, people sleeping outside, and public safety. But the County has responsibility for homelessness as it relates to health care, mental health care, foster care, you know? And so the services side; the Housing Authority has a responsibility for homelessness as it relates to it's federal mandate, right? From HUD. The collective impact model says that everyone agrees. We agree to a set of strategies. We agree to each doing our part.

JL: So as an example, think about how we develop housing. Um, you know, the City would have the land. The County has Measure A money to pay for the land. The Housing Authority has operating dollars. Service providers have subject-matter expertise. All of that together creates a working permanent supportive housing project. It's not any one entity that can pay for all of those pieces. So once we started rolling out these strategies, we wanted to make sure that we had alignment across the systems. The City of San José, the County of Santa Clara and the Housing Authority are the main owners of homelessness locally. Them working in concert together has been, I'd say the biggest sea change that, that this sector has seen in, you know, decades.

AR: My understanding of the Community Plan in like, a sentence, would be that it is a collective group of people from across the City and the County, and all the nonprofits that we work with, to really tackle our homelessness crisis and get everybody housed. But I would love to have a better understanding of what the Community Plan is and where the idea for it came from. Because I understand that this is the second iteration of that plan.

JL: The plan is, uh, uh, an outcropping of the collective impact model that I was describing a little earlier. Back in 2014, we hadn't been practiced in working together. Believe it or not, Alli, the City of San José had a ten-year plan to homelessness. And the County of Santa Clara had a separate ten-year plan to end homelessness. And these were things that were probably mandated by like federal government or something, but y'all each had a plan and the plans never met up.

[group laughter]

JL: And they were both coming due, meaning it was like 2015 to 20, 20, 25, 2005 to 2015 or 20 2003 to 2013 - point was they were both ending. And so we came up with this, with the 2015 plan. And it was almost like revolutionary. We got every city, the County, everybody to endorse it, which meant everyone agreed to this thing for five years. And, you know, we had things in the plan. Like we want a house 6,000 people. And we need to build supportive housing, but we don't know how to pay for it, so it was a goal, figuring out how to fund it. And, uh, house veterans, right? And then later, when you look back on five years, we've housed over 14,000 people permanently; 95% housing retention. We passed Measure A and

Measure E, two ballot measures that the County and the City did, that is geared towards building housing, supportive housing. And even more importantly, the Housing Authority, the County, the City, each set policy priorities around building extremely low-income housing. To some cases, some of the most aggressive policies in the nation.

JL: The County took responsibility from a contracts perspective, right? Put the outcomes and the goals, the City put the outcomes and the goals of the plan into contracts and the nonprofits executed because of course they would, right? But instead of doing all these different things, disparately, now we're all moving towards one strategy, one way to measure. And part of that, we did things like the cost of homelessness study that told us how much money that we were wasting on homelessness. It helped us understand who is the most in trauma and needs to be housed more quickly. However, homelessness has continued to go up and up and up and up. Why, why has it gone up and up and up? Because we have not addressed root causes that are pushing so many people in a deep poverty and homelessness, which is disproportionately families of color, which is disproportionately extremely low-income housing, income, uh, households. And, and so the new plan aims to address not only what we were doing in the last plan, which was house people, build housing and house people. But now it's also the strategy.

JL: There's three strategies. One strategy is the root causes. Why are families of color at a disproportionate rate becoming homeless? Why do we have two to three times as many people becoming homeless every month over every one person that gets out. That's not the failure of the homelessness system, that's the failure of America: gentrification, systemic racism, structural racism, white supremacy, you know, criminal justice. All of these systems that have perpetually not allowed families to build wealth, not allowed families to live in certain parts of town, not allowed education. You know, it all catches up. At homelessness. So, and then the, so root causes, uh, really ending and preventing homelessness, right, is big effort. And especially because of this pandemic, now, prevention is center stage. And then, uh, the last strategy is really, um, really like, uh, basic needs and providing a better quality of life for people that are still outside and improving the neighborhood.

AR: What does the lived experience advisory board do for the community plan? How do you work with everybody else to develop, help develop that plan, Lee?

LC: I gave a little, some input on it. Um, storage for the homeless. You know, that is a way to stop a lot of violence because a lot of people take from other people out there, you know, when they go in and go in. So people having a place to store their home is having a place to store their belongings to stop quick, stop a lot of problems and stop a lot of violence, because that's a big problem in the encampments.

JL: The third strategy, wouldn't be as robust as it is without, I would say, both the City of San José and the lived experience advisory board. They were really pushing to include...That's the problem, right? When too many people who don't have lived experience are making decisions. We miss things there. One of the things that we have done a bad job of in the sector nationwide is we haven't tried to really lead from lived experience; include the input from people that have expertise. And so we make decisions that don't work for people. Um, and so the storage, I wouldn't have, that wouldn't have been something I would've put in

the plan, but that was something that Lee made sure that we put in the plan. You know, uh, those are our, because, because they understand better, the practicalities of what's needed when you're moving around on the street.

AR: For people that have been working on this for a while, it's been obvious for, for years, but 2020 especially has, kind of pulled the wool off of everybody's eyes, is this conversation about racial equity in housing? And can you talk about how racial inequity drives homelessness and how the community plan is hoping to end that or address it?

JL: Every system has been designed to better serve white people and...from the jump. And when you think about, uh, how we build housing, what kind of housing we build. When you build at area meeting income levels that are, that are higher than what minimum wage pays. And who is in minimum wage jobs, who are you building for? The fight of my career has been to pull apart the fact that all affordable housing is not the same. And when we look at what we built for decades and decades, we built at higher levels of area median income than would ever address homelessness and would ever address deepest poverty. So I'm not saying that we don't need 80% AMI, 60% AMI, but, uh, because we need all of it because we've done a terrible job building any of it. But we definitely need 30% AMI. And we definitely build that the least. You know, that there's a, you can look at national studies, the National Low Income Housing Coalition has done a report called "The Gap." And you could look at the shortage of ULI housing in every city in the nation. There's not a city where minimum wage equates a place to live anymore. So any one of pick any issue, pick any, you know, slice right. Uh, redlining, um, wealth building, and it has been designed to hurt black and brown families. And, um, you know, it's just the most egregious, I mean, it's so, so. Homelessness is a civil rights issue. Homelessness is a racial justice issue. This is about housing justice. This isn't about charity or helping people, or, you know, bootstrapping - there's no bootstrapping. This is about justice; bringing justice to people that we have marginalized and discriminated against forever. So, so that first strategy is how do we do that? Um, and, and because there has never been a conversation, right, about, about it. 2020 is forcing that conversation. It is, it could not, it could not be more important. Um, but the thing about homelessness is it's, this has always been the conversation. There's nothing more important than to bring justice to people that have had justice denied for so long. And homelessness is the manifestation, really, I think of the absence of all of that. Can we fix all of it in five years? I mean, can anyone fix all of it in five years? Can we do everything humanly possible? Is this what I'm committed to? Heck yeah. Heck yeah.

LC: I like what Jen said. The thing that keeps sticking out to me and about to me is hope. You know, um, that's a really big issue, you know. I think I've done a lot of time, you know, and then for me, it's like, you know, certain things come at me. And you know, people of color do more time, and in a way, I got used to it, going through this time I get out and same thing, you know, I know I'm going back to the same thing. Again, it goes back to me not having hope. And that's why, uh, I really, you know, the word hope really stands out to me.

AR: Can you talk more about the importance of hope and what having hope means?

LC: A lot of people, or, uh, I'm gonna say more, they have more hope than we did, you know. Or as, you know, change, I know change is going to come. I don't know. I, I believe it's like,

uh, only so much I can do like systematic discrimination, stuff like that, you know, that's, uh, that's been, uh, something has kept people down, me included, you know. But, uh, feel with help from the system, you know, doors opening from the system, you know. But then again, it goes, it boils down to the individual, you know. But so many people are stuck out there, hopeless, you know, like the homeless, you know, I can really only speak for myself. I was hopeless. I didn't have hope, you know? So what did I feel? What do I have to lose? I got used to going to jail, I was going to jail so much since 2015. Last time I got out of prison, you know, I didn't care. I just go to jail. I go back to the street. Finally, again, something clicked. I finally got tired of the life I was living. I got a taste of being housed. You know, I got a taste of that. You know, I got to taste of being clean, living without drugs. And hope started coming more and more alive in, you know, uh. You know, eating three meals a day, you know, um, exercising my brain, my body, you know, it came back alive in me. You know, the hope that I can, um, inspire, encourage a lot of people to come out of that hopelessness, uh, inspire them to have hope. Because I see a lot of people out there, I was out there over, uh, almost two years ago, I was out there on the street with, you know, and they see the change in me and I hope and pray that they see something in me that will inspire them to change, you know, to know that there is hope.

JL: No, you see how powerful Lee is and how powerful he's going to keep being. He went, he lived, uh, he knows what it's like to sleep outside. He knows what it's like to lose hope. He knows what it's like to find it again. And, um, he, that is what other, that is what is going to be the, the hope for so many other people.

AR: How has the field of working to end homelessness... How has that changed since.... I guess Lee, I don't know how easy this question will be for you, but how has this changed since you started?

JL: We wanted to prove to people that we could house a thousand people permanently because that's how this has evolved. Right? Uh, the eighties and the nineties, we thought people could, just needed a shelter bed. They're down on their luck, a couple of nights in a shelter. They're going to be okay. And so we didn't build any housing that's affordable. Meanwhile, all the other issues that are creating homelessness continue to exacerbate, especially in the Bay Area. So it really wasn't until like the last 10 years where this idea of like, like the most obvious thing in the world, there's just, people need homes, homeless. We haven't been able to get enough housing at scale. But that's been the evolution. And so now, uh, in a perfect world, everything leads towards permanency, meaning outreach workers are making sure people are in the system are being triaged. If they want a shelter bed, right. The goal is working towards permanency. Some people don't need supportive housing. They don't have the kind of, uh, health barriers that would preclude them from getting a job. Right. And, and, and finding their own way. There's a whole subsection of people where that is true, right. People that are disabled seniors. Right. And so we have to pay their housing has to be subsidized forever. Whole lot of other people are homeless, situationally, like Lee, right? Who now, getting a job, back on his feet and all the, you know, all those things, right? But still need an affordable place to stay. Um, and so creating that deepest level of affordability is the bottom line goal, no matter what, it's just the differences, that robust services that some people are going to need. And some people are not.

AR: What does success look like for you in 2025?

JL: In 2025, we should be close to executing Measure A. You know, it was a 10 year bond from 2015 or 2016, which means 120 projects are in development. Uh, it'll mean that we have addressed the inflow of people coming into homelessness. And we have reduced the amount of people that enter into homelessness, and we have addressed and reduced the disproportionality of people of color entering into homelessness. It will mean that we have added 2000 more shelter beds, or not just shelter beds, interim housing options, because, you know, uh, uh, the modular homes that San José is building or, uh, other hotel-motel or the other ways that we're adding it, doesn't have to just be typical shelter, especially now with COVID and the transmission. And you know, how congregate is, uh, less safe for people. But we'll have done that. Um, I think that I'm hoping that we'll have an, we'll have, um, understood how we're contributing to the disproportionality. And we have, uh, changed the systems or worked to change the systems that are, that are creating the disproportionality. And I think the most important thing for me is we've really agreed to learn, to share power with people that have lived expertise and that every, uh, commission, every panel, every board, every staff, every housing department has, uh, people who have been homeless in our community, working on this issue alongside other people. Uh, that's something that's just so long overdue.

LC: Yeah. I agree. I agree with Jen on that is because like you say, um, somebody who hasn't been out there, who hasn't been homeless, who hasn't been on the street? They can't really, they don't really know the, um, depth of it. They don't really know what it's really like out there. You know, one thing about, um, the Unhoused Task Force, they mentioned, uh, people were staying in places at night that's not meant to live in, and that's like up in the creek and stuff like that. That's a very serious issue. And, uh, uh, that's one thing I really like about Destination Home. They're reaching out, you know, all kinds of ways to help the unhoused. They really inspired me. They accepted me, brought me in, you know, and they give me a job, you know? Um, so, um, yeah, I fill some important duties, you know, and it's, this is new to me, so it's not all the time easy, but, you know, I think the main thing I can do is show up and do what I can, you know. Like far as the, um, the homeless, you know, um, I have a lot of input on that because I was out there for a long time.

AR: We want people that are listening to have some sense of what they might be able to do to help. Uh, and so what, what would be one piece of advice you would give to listeners for how to be more involved, how they can make a positive impact and make a difference in their community? Either of you.

JL: You know, if you don't want to spend any money, uh, on this, a great thing you can do is sign up for our Housing Ready Communities Initiative and help us when housing projects are being put forward, because it's astounding, the amount of people that want to fight it. Right. So don't fight it, help us and homelessness. How would you do that? Tell your council member that you're fine with it. That's it. That's just, it just tell them, right. So that's free, and great, and we would love it. And Housing Ready Communities is on our website and anybody can sign up. Uh, I think right now on a smaller scale, you know, so little bit of money, uh, this pandemic for people that have been outside, uh, has rendered the very, uh,

meager options that people had, uh, have taken those have been lost. Meaning they can't go to a library and charge their cell phone, right? They can't go to congregate food places and get a meal. So people are really hurting, extra, right? And, and so hygiene supplies. Uh, gift cards for food, like small ways to support people, bottles of water is, is, is as meaningful as ever. And it's why Lee is feeding folks four times a week, right? Because people, all the infrastructure disappeared. And then on the larger scale, you know, we can keep it the family from entering into homelessness for about \$4,000. It's not really that much money to prevent the entire, uh, horrendous catastrophe of a family, losing everything and going through kids and everything else, right, of what that means. It's not that much money. So, you know, uh, those sorts of things are not that expensive and, um, are things that should be priorities, whether it's foundations or giving or anything else. We say we care about education and other stuff. Well, you don't learn when you're on the streets and you can't learn in your car. Right? And we have way, way, way too many families trying to learn in the streets and in the car. What about on the human side, Lee? what did you, what did you need from people when you were out? So like, I walked by you, what would you have liked me to do?

LC: Um, one thing I really appreciated when people did come out with food, you know, and come through the encampments, that really meant a lot too. That, and sometimes they came through with, um, clothes, you know, blankets, stuff like that, just basic things a person needs out there. Um, you know, they have now, like we do a lot, we, you know, uh, be able to help people with clothing, with shoes. You know, I see some people out there with very dirty. I mean, you know, they used to talk about it, but, um, you know, I offer them. You need some clothes, you need some pant? You know, we've be able to help, you know, pretty small scale, but I – well I don't want to say small scale. But we've been helping a lot in that area.

Thanks so much to Jen and Lee for sharing their time, expertise and stories with me on today's show. If you'd like to learn more about Destination Home and the work they do in Santa Clara County, you can log onto their website at destinationhomesv.org.

Thanks for listening to Dwellings, the City of San José Housing Department podcast.

Our theme music is "Speed City," composed and performed by Ettaine Charles. Thanks to San José Jazz for letting us use your music.

If you like the show, please [subscribe](#) and share with your friends and family.

If you're looking for more ways to get involved with housing and homelessness response, please [check out the show notes](#).

You can follow the Housing Department on social media. We're on [Twitter](#) and [Facebook](#) at S J city housing. Our artwork is by Chelsea Palacio. Dwellings is produced by me, Alli Rico and Jeff Scott of the Housing Department.