

Episode 6: San Jose's Bridge Housing Communities

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 Ragan Henninger, deputy director for the City of San José Housing Department, to learn more about the City's bridge housing and emergency interim housing communities.

Alli Rico (AR): Where did the idea for these [bridge housing communities](#) come from?

Ragan Henninger (RH): So bridge housing really, uh, derived from a conversation about sanctioned encampments. And it was really a community conversation. There was a lot of interest from community advocates and other groups to do sanctioned encampments or, or some other kind of fast, low-cost, um, means of sheltering people because we have, uh, over 9,000 unsheltered people in our County and clearly not enough shelter beds. And so really the idea came from, how can we provide people a safer, more dignified, uh, place to shelter than, um, in our creeks and parks. And so we really, we started looking at sanctioned encampments, but discovered a bunch of, uh, legal concerns and health and safety and building concerns. And so it led us down this winding path of some state legislation. So there was a state bill that was passed a few years ago now called [AB 2176](#). And it really, uh, gave the - just the City of San José some flexibility to write our own, uh, building code and health and safety code. And so that really, uh, provided a path for us to develop the, our first bridge housing community or tiny home community on, um, a piece of land owned by Valley Transportation Authority. And that site is up and running. It's uh, 40 tiny homes.

AR: How involved was the city in getting that law passed?

RH: We had a lot of conversations at the state level with, uh, legislators, but also with the state Department of Housing and Community Development, because, uh, there was concern that this, that tiny homes would be a shift away from our housing first model and our really, our priority of building permanent affordable housing for extremely low-income people. And so, we really worked collaboratively on the language in that bill so that we are working... The language in the bill actually says that we have to provide services and that we have to work with people to, so that they have a path to stable housing. And that can mean all sorts of things, depending on an individual's particular needs.

AR: So bridge housing is, is often described as interim housing, and it's clearly it's written into the law that this cannot be their last, these people's last place to live. So can you explain a little more like, where interim housing fits in to the housing first model and like, in terms of permanent supportive housing shelters, affordable housing, stuff like that.

RH: You know, building more affordable housing for extremely low-incomes still remains the city's top priority. That is how we are going to end someone's homelessness. That's how we're going to prevent someone's homelessness. That's how we're going to keep people, um, of, of, of all incomes able to live and work in San José. So that will always be priority. But

there are over 9,000 people in our County that are, that are living in some pretty deplorable conditions, living along our creeks, living in our parks, living along our freeways, um, that, that deserve better and deserve a more dignified, um, place to sleep. And so interim housing is, um, has been around in, in homelessness and housing for some time, it's also called transitional housing. It's really, um, sort of a temporary step for someone until they, um, they find their permanent home. So for us, we're really trying to use it as a complimentary tool in our toolbox. So we are, for example, using it, um, for people who may be waiting for a permanent supportive housing unit, and it's not, it's under construction or it's being rehabilitated, and they just need a place to stay for a temporary time period. We're also using it for individuals who are in our rapid rehousing program, that's a rental subsidy program and they may, they have that voucher for a rental subsidy, but they're just searching for their unit. And so this is where, um, transitional housing can be a good resource because someone is living in a transitional housing unit, and we know they have a place to go. Um, but it's a lot safer and way more dignified to be in a transitional housing unit than it is to be in a tent along the freeway.

AR: What, so what is the difference between if there is a difference between, um, bridge housing communities and emergency interim housing communities?

RH: It's very confusing, right? BHC bridge, housing community EIH, emergency interim housing – it's like way too many acronyms. So, a bridge housing community, those are, the one difference is the, just the physical difference. The bridge housing communities are tiny homes that are about 100 square feet. Um, and they have a shared kitchen, shared bathroom onsite, uh, with other kinds of amenities, outdoor space and, uh, some communal gardens. And then, um, emergency interim housing, we, um, we built that as part of our COVID-19 response. So, back in March, [the governor signed an executive order](#) where, um, he lifted a bunch of, um, environmental review and some other sort of, uh, red tape for construction. And so, we took advantage of that and were able to quickly build this emergency interim housing. But the, the reason it's called emergency interim housing is because we are right now as part of our COVID response housing people who have been impacted by COVID. So, they're medically vulnerable, older adults with underlying health conditions. Another difference between an EIH and a BHC is the EIH is actually has a little bit different um, construction types. So, these are prefabricated modular type units. They look a little bit like a shipping container in that they're kind of long and narrow. Um, and each unit has their own private bathroom and shower, which is different from the tiny home, does not have that. Um, but they do have a shared kitchen and laundry facility. So, there's a little bit of difference in the construction. The emergency interim housing meets our housing quality standards. So, if at some point in the future, we wanted to take, um, house people there who have vouchers like a Section 8 voucher, we could do that. Um, but for the time being we're serving, um, those, uh, COVID-impact or COVID-vulnerable individuals.

AR: [Governor Newsom attended the opening of our first emergency interim housing community](#). What was that like?

RH: I think it was really great to have the governor come because it was, um, tangible, real solutions, um, that the City of San José worked really hard to implement. And it was a great

partnership because the governor had that executive order back in March, and here we are in November saying we did it. We went from not even having a site identified to new construction of 78 units in just a matter of months. And so it was really, I think, a great event, both for the governor to see kind of, um, you know, compassion in action, but also for the city to just have a spotlight on all of the hard work that, um, it took to, to go fast and to really cut a construction timeline down from, you know, four or five years, which would be a typical affordable housing development to, um, you know, six or seven months.

AR: I'm trying, there was like a specific... Oh, I think it was, at [the groundbreaking for Evans Lane](#), somebody made a comment about Evan's Lane is going to have the same modular units that Bernal has, but that the site at Evans Lane is big enough that once everybody's moved in, there's going to be construction of like a bigger building of affordable housing. Is that the case, is that what we're planning for all of them?

RH: So just, uh, just for this Evans Lane site, because it is a very large site, several acres that's owned by the Housing Department and has always been planned for affordable housing. And then along comes global pandemic, and so we were searching for sites to pivot and start, uh, constructing this emergency interim housing. And so Evans Lane made sense for a couple of reasons. One, the city already owned it. So we didn't have to go through purchasing a property or leasing a property or any of that, we could just go fast because we already owned it. And then secondly, it is large enough where we could keep operating this emergency interim housing um, for however long we choose, and still the site is large enough where you could build, go continue forward with the long-term plans of building a normal, um, affordable housing development. And I think the ideal scenario is that, um, you know, we build long-term on the site and, and be able to serve families in that affordable housing, and hopefully the families that are in our transitional emergency interim housing could, you know, move in right onsite to a more permanent home.

AR: So what agencies do we work with to help run and manage these communities? And how do those relationships work?

RH: You know, in, in pure, bureaucratic form, we did a competitive process. So, we put out a, a request for proposals saying we, the City of San José, we'll have these three brand new interim housing sites, and we're, we're looking for, um, those agencies experienced in serving homeless individuals and families to submit their operating proposals. And it - we put out a bit of a challenge, um, for responses because we wanted, um, agencies that could serve, uh, medically vulnerable people in our COVID phase, and then pivot whenever COVID ends to be able to serve, um, individuals in a, in a more, um, traditional transitional housing environment. And so, we had, um, we went through the submittal process and [HomeFirst](#) was selected, uh, to operate two sites, the Monterey and Bernal site, which is 78 units for single adults and also our Rue Ferrari site, which is 118 beds for singles and couples. And then, um, a collaboration of [PATH](#) and [Abode Services](#) was selected to operate our families' site at Evans Lane, which is 121 beds. And the relationship really has been a partnership from the beginning. We've um, had to, um, be flexible during COVID, um, flexible in terms of construction timeline, that's been changing, um, flexible in terms of referrals. Flexible just in terms of programming, because this is new for everybody. Um, and those service providers

have all really risen to the challenge and have, um, stepped up because you know, this is really unique times. But also a really unique opportunity that, that even after COVID, we'll have these units in our community, um, as an asset.

AR: Are there other cities building these types of, of, both bridge housing and emergency interim housing? I know that the state law was very specific for San José is so would, like if San Francisco or LA decided like, "oh, we should totally do what San José is doing," would they then have to go get a new state law or like an amendment to the current state law?

RH: We've seen other communities building tiny homes, similar to our bridge housing communities. In fact, when we were building those, we had, uh, staff and community members go to Portland and Seattle to visit their tiny home communities. We haven't seen, um, the emergency interim housing model yet. Um, I venture to say it's first in the state? Um, Santa Clara County is not far behind us. They, um, were able to pass legislation similar to ours. I think their state legislation is [AB 143](#), which provides them some similar flexibility in terms of, uh, building and health and safety code. And they are soon to open up a, um, similar to our BHC they're tiny homes, but on wheels, I believe, so they very transitional and movable, uh, and that will open up at the County Civic Plaza, downtown by, um, the County building.

AR: From both a cost and a time perspective, can you talk about why bridge housing communities are such an attractive interim housing option?

RH: It's definitely attractive in terms of fast, we've been able to go a lot faster than a traditional affordable housing development. And that is, uh, due to that governor's executive order that kind of waved a magic wand and, um, reduced a lot of red tape. I think cost-wise, we're still doing that analysis of whether or not it's significantly, um, lower costs than just a traditional affordable housing development.

AR: And beyond, beyond the five BHCs and EIHs that we either have already opened or that are. Currently under construction, um, are we looking to build more of these communities? Like have we, have we been looking at other sites while we're getting these ones ready to open? What's that experience been like?

RH: I think we're, we're trying to, uh, get one more site in of emergency interim housing before all these kind of magical orders, um, expire. The challenge has really been finding sites. And it's the challenge, um, for any developer - market rate, affordable, uh, when you live in a city like San José that's, um, largely infill development, you know, siting is a challenge. There's not vast empty parcels of land, um, when you're the 10th largest city in the country. So it's really been a challenge to find sites. Um, we're, we're scrubbing our list of city-owned sites and a lot of people think, "well, you're the city. You must own a ton of property!" But we own a ton of like really funky property, like weird random easements and property that doesn't really lend itself to development. You know, they're kind of random easements along a freeway or, weird, oddly shaped parcels, you know, that, um, just aren't meant for development. So, we're kind of scrubbing that list to see if there's any other sites we can kind of seek out and get an a for emergency interim housing site in before these, um, special executive orders expire.

AR: So how would it work if we found another site before that executive order expires?

RH: We have to start construction and then you also have to use funding from the state. Uh, which we have, we, we could do that. And I know the mayor's office is working really hard to see if, uh, we can also get some philanthropic donations of materials and construction. So we're sort of looking under every rock and couch cushion to see if we can find the money to get a fourth site built and operated. That's the other piece that's challenging is once you build it, you do have to operate it with, you know, the appropriate levels of services. And especially during COVID, when we are, um, serving that, uh, more medically fragile population.

AR: Now that we have these sites operating, what have been some lessons that the city has learned, that the operators have learned, and have those communities, uh, been performing as we expect them, or have there been like, "whoa, we had no idea this is going to happen and it's fantastic"

RH: I think for the Mabury bridge housing community, we've really seen, um, I guess a shorter than anticipated average length of stay, which is great. You know, I think it says something about when you give people, you know, a safe and dignified place to stay, and they're taken out of that environment of living on the streets where you're just in survival mode - survival for, um, for all of your basic needs, from food to water, to shelter, your it's just about survival, so how could you possibly, you know, think about jobs or resumes or any of that when you're just thinking about, "where am I going to refill my water bottle?" Especially in COVID when a lot of places where you might refill a water bottle or charge your phone are closed. And so I think that's, what's been special about BHC is that it's, um. You know, been that, that safe place for people to stay where they're taken out of that survival mode and allowed to focus on, um, themselves. Um, so that's been super cool. And for the emergency interim housing it's, um, you know, we've, we've only been operating for such a short time, but. When I've been at that Monterey and Bernal site, I've just, um, heard from so many of the people that are staying there, how grateful they are, um, just stay there to have their own unit. Um, and so, you know, it's, uh, as I said, it's a medically vulnerable, probably more fragile population. And so we've adjusted services a little bit, um, too accommodate that, um, kind of more therapists and more, um, occupational therapists there. But other than a little bit of service retooling, it's really been operating really well. And as I said, it's just, um. The, the joy and the happiness that people have for being able to, to stay there, um, has been really great to see.

AR: Can you talk a little bit about what you do in your role as deputy director?

RH: Sure. Um, so every day for the Housing Department is different during our COVID response. Um, but overall, I oversee our homeless response programs, our kind of special projects like bridge housing and emergency interim housing. I also oversee our grants team that, um, that that's all of our federal funding that we get from HUD, and then we in turn, um, pump that, that money back out into the community for all kinds of services. And then I also oversee our policy and advocacy team. So, we do a lot of advocacy at the state and federal level, and we also do a lot of policy kind of thinking work. We have are working on a [city-wide anti-displacement strategy](#) that council just approved, um, back in September, that

is really, how do we create tools, um, to keep people in San José of all income levels. So, and I also oversee the administration and communication functions of the department.

AR: And how did you get involved in housing work? Like what drew you to it?

RH: I've been doing this work for 20 some years in some form or fashion. Um, I used to work for HomeFirst, so I'm part of that, um, small but elite crew. Um, and then I switched over to policy and I started working, uh, for Councilmember Liccardo when he was a council member for the downtown. And I think what interested me about making that shift from, you know, homeless services and housing to policy was really, could I implement change, change on a larger level by, kind of, working on policy? And I said, well, I'll just try it for a year. And if I hate it, I'll just go back to working in services. And I've now worked for the city for 14 years or so. Um, most of that time with Councilmember Liccardo and then Mayor Liccardo as his policy and budget director. Um, and worked on all kinds of housing policy from our [inclusionary housing policy](#) to our [affordable housing impact fee](#), to [rent stabilization](#) when I was in his office. And then, um, this opportunity arose to come work for the Housing Department, which was fantastic because now I get to breathe housing and homelessness every day.

AR: What has changed about housing and, and combating homelessness, since you first started with HomeFirst?

RH: I think I've kind of seen almost a full circle. So, when I was working for HomeFirst in the mid to late nineties, we were in this kind of economic boom, dot-com boom, and Silicon Valley was kind of the place to be. Yet we were seeing this rise in homelessness and it was really kind of, um, a tale of two worlds. There was the like, Silicon Valley of all these dot-coms and startups and crazy economic engine, and then people living in such extreme poverty. And so, um, I feel like we've come full circle back to that again, where homelessness and housing is, is the issue of the day and on everyone's mind. And San José and Silicon Valley remains this economic engine, um, but we've got thousands of people, um, living in such dire and extreme poverty. Definitely a shift in, um, in how we do business, you know? Back in the nineties, it was kind of a Wild West in terms of services, you know? We didn't have a coordinated, uh, entry for homeless folks. We didn't, um, we didn't have this agreement that we would serve and house our most vulnerable first, um, because our most vulnerable and our most, um, sick are really what's the highest drain on our safety net systems and our medical response systems and our health and hospital systems. So, you know, none of that existed back in the nineties, we were all just kind of operating as separate entities and, um, we didn't have that, that coordinated, um, level of service. So that's definitely been a shift. I think a more recent shift has really been the acknowledgement that we need to build affordable housing that's at extremely low income levels, because this, sort of moderate-income or even low-income housing just isn't affordable enough. Um, you know, if you're working at a restaurant or you're on a social security income, it's just not enough to, to live here and survive here.

AR: If somebody wanted to get more involved in being a housing advocate or helping support unhoused neighbors while they transition - anything, if somebody wants to get

more involved, um, what is one piece of advice that you would give to somebody who's, who's wondering what they can possibly do to help?

RH: The problem can almost seem overwhelming, right? When you're driving or you're walking somewhere and you just see so many homeless people, it can seem so overwhelming, you know, what can I, as one person do? And I think the greatest thing that's that, that someone can do, or, or maybe two things. So first we, we desperately need people to welcome housing of all types in their neighborhoods, in their city. Because we need it, we need it all. And we so desperately need people to say, um, that it's okay. And, um, that this is needed. And so Destination: Home has a great program called [Housing Ready Communities](#) that provides people, um, talking points, it provides people the facts around homelessness. Um, you know, these are homeless people are our neighbors, they're our residents, they're our community. Our, um, homeless census says that, you know, 85% of the people are actually from San José and Santa Clara County. They're not people from the Midwest moving to California because it's sunny here. Um, these are, these are people that are from here. They're ours, they're our neighbors. And so Housing Ready Communities provides all that kind of information so that, um, people can, can [write their policymakers](#) when there's, um, um, affordable housing development that's coming before a city council or planning commission. Um, having voices there that say, we need this and we need a lot more of it is really important. And then the second thing, that's just super simple, but doesn't happen is that, when you pass a homeless person on the sidewalk, you can actually look at them and say hello. Um, you don't have to avert your eye. You know, that part of the, the trauma and the stigmatism of being homeless is, you know, people just, um, think they're forgotten, and that the community doesn't want them or doesn't care about them. And so just having, um, just, uh, compassion for another human being, um, also makes a difference and it's a, it's a tiny thing, but it makes a difference to that one person.

Thanks to Ragan for joining me on today's episode. If you'd like to learn more about Housing Ready Communities, please visit destinationhomesv.org/hrcaction.

To learn more about the work the Housing Department is doing on bridge housing and emergency interim housing communities. Visit our website at sjhousing.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.