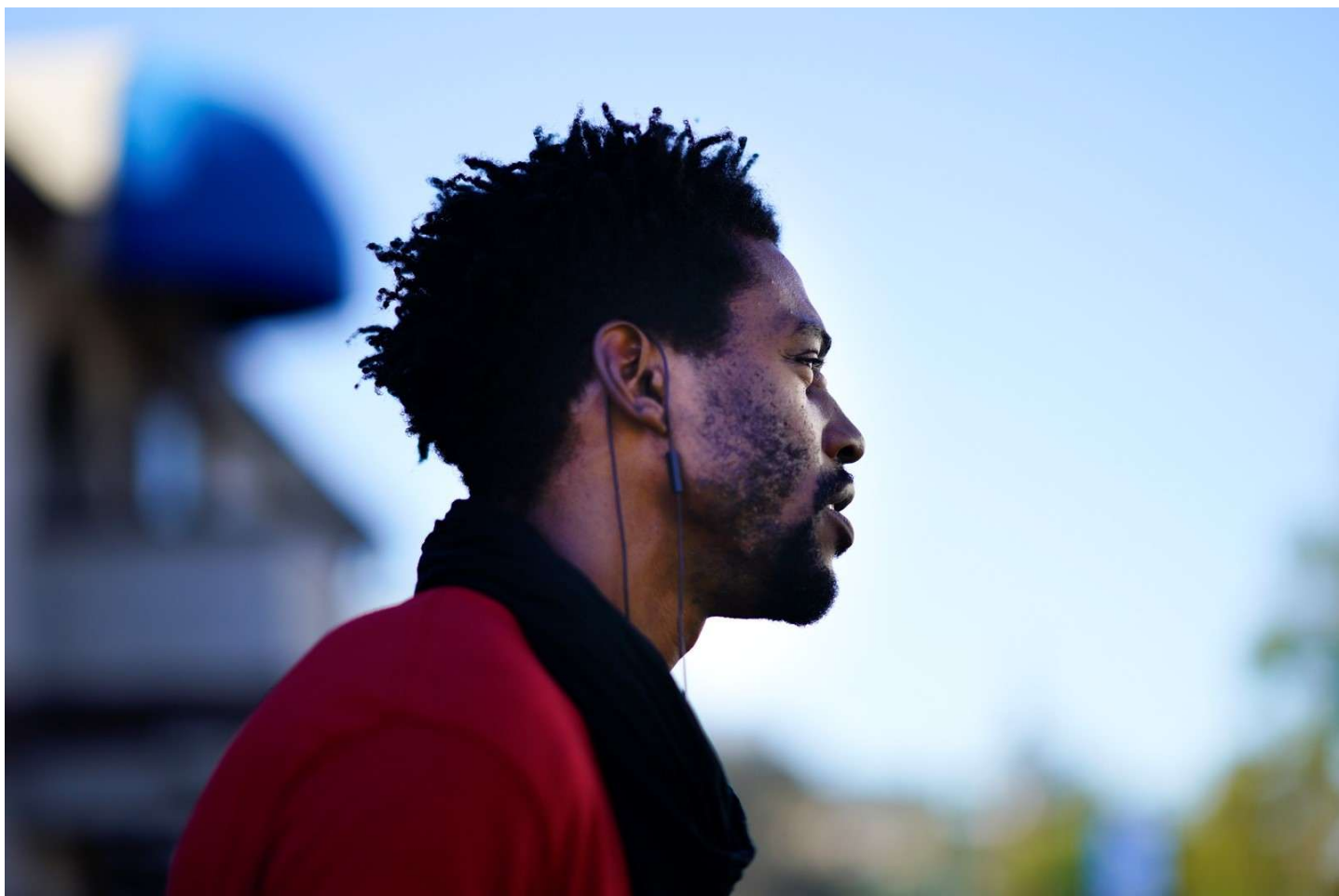


Amid a nationwide debate over homelessness spending, one man in East County just wanted . . .

A safe place to sleep This program gets homeless people into housing fast. Will it be one of the last?



Dalen Harrison, 30, at top, gathers his personal belongings from the homeless encampment he had lived at for two months in Lemon Grove. At 6 feet, 10 inches tall, he had been sleeping in a tent in November with his feet sticking out because he was taller than his tent. Nelvin C. Cepeda / U-T photos



BY BLAKE NELSON

UNION-TRIBUNE

There are several ways to react when you see a cluster of tents behind a Walgreens. Many of those responses were on display one recent November morning.

Looking away is an option, and some people passing by the drugstore in Lemon Grove kept their eyes on the sidewalk.

Telling everyone in the tents to leave — or, more accurately, telling them that their stuff will be trashed if they don't find somewhere else to sleep — remains popular. “You guys hear what I said over there?” a man wearing a “security” vest announced at one point. “I suggest if you guys have time, start packing your belongings.”

Then there's a third approach, which has long guided homelessness policy at both the state and federal levels. Yet it's become so controversial that the strategy is under siege in Washington, D.C., and now the subject of multiple lawsuits. This method was embodied by two vans that pulled up after the

security guard left. A woman in a blue T-shirt stepped out of one of the driver's seats.

"Let's go," she shouted toward the encampment. "I want to get these leases signed!"

Housing First is a self-explanatory approach to homelessness. You get people off the street and into housing as fast as possible. Supportive services, including addiction treatment and mental health care, come second. It's not hard to find elected officials throughout San Diego County and the California Statehouse promoting the strategy, and Housing First has been the official practice of the federal government since George W. Bush was president.

President Donald Trump, however, is not a fan. While Trump was unable to dismantle the policy during his first term, the president's second administration appears to be making more headway.

There is a large body of research backing up Housing First. But unpacking why homelessness countywide has nonetheless worsened in recent years is complicated by the fact that Housing First, as it's meant to be implemented, is not always put into action.

"That phrase 'Housing First' ends up being applied to a lot of different practices that have nothing to do with housing," said Jennifer Nations, managing director of the Homelessness Hub research center at UC San Diego. Shelters, for example, may say they follow Housing First principles when making beds easily accessible, yet those spots, by definition, can't provide long-term stability or community. "Part of the deep misunderstanding about, 'Is Housing First effective?' comes from the term really being used very loosely," Nations added.

A program underway in Lemon Grove is closer to the Housing First ideal. Earlier this year, the East County city and the Regional Task Force on Homelessness jointly received \$8.4 million from the state to find and house more than 100 people living near a highway. The initiative, which is supported by California's Encampment Resolution Fund, helps cover rent and supportive services and comes with a roster of landlords willing to quickly take in tenants.

Outreach workers began driving around Lemon Grove, looking for people camped near state Route 94. Whoever they found might end up inadvertently participating in one of the last well-funded efforts to treat housing as the central problem to be solved.

The list

Dalen Harrison was about 6 years old when he first lost a home.

He had been living with his mom and little brother by San Diego's City Heights neighborhood when police came to the door, he recalled in an interview. He's not entirely sure what brought them there, although Harrison thinks the place lacked electricity. It may have been an abandoned unit. Regardless, officers took him and his sibling to a nearby community to stay with their grandmother.

Harrison eventually attended Helix High School in La Mesa and enrolled in a trade school to learn cement mixing and painting. But he struggled to afford the gas needed to get to class and left before graduating, Harrison said. Jobs in Texas and Nevada similarly didn't stick.

Crucially, that biography doesn't really matter when it comes to the outreach program in Lemon Grove. The only real requirement to receive aid is: Are you sleeping outside in a roughly 2-mile stretch of land in the northern part of the city?

Harrison met that criteria. He had moved back to San Diego County earlier in the year and was camping a little south of the 94 when a staffer from Crisis House, one of the nonprofits in charge, stopped by. She put his name on a list. A few weeks later, Harrison, who is now 30, walked onto a dusty lot in Lemon Grove to see if being on that list was actually going to change his life.

In front of him was a pop-up resource fair. Sitting behind plastic tables were representatives of local governments and service organizations, including Crisis House, the task force and San Diego County. Fairs like this can be found around the region, but this one was different partially because of the presence of the nonprofit Brilliant Corners. At the moment, that group had 25 landlords ready to take in people from the street.

Homeless residents still have to apply for those units. Applicants can be rejected. Yet Brilliant Corners offers landlords a number of incentives, including a fund to cover any damages to apartments and a pledge to continue paying rent on empty units in order to keep them open and available for the next person.

Harrison got in line by the tables. He carried a skateboard and wore a bright red basketball jersey. His height was the only thing making him stand out: Harrison is close to 7 feet tall.

A short while later, a woman ahead of him suddenly shouted, "Oh, my God!" People began clapping. The woman, 50-year-old Danielle Reese, had just been

told that a unit was ready for her to move in. She raised her hands in triumph. Harrison gave her a hug. Reese grabbed a bar of soap off one of the tables and jumped into a van. The first thing she wanted to do in her new home was take a bath.

Others weren't as lucky. If outreach workers don't see you camping in certain areas during specific periods of time, you don't make the list. One man who had been left off glowered from a nearby hill. "I just need housing," he exclaimed. An elderly woman walking through the fair with a limp was in a similar position. She murmured, "I've never had to do this before," and began to cry.

Staffers said those two might be able to make future lists.

Harrison, meanwhile, was told he could tour potential apartments the following week.

The research

The workers behind the tables were being guided by a long list of studies examining what types of aid are most effective. One of the largest happened in the far north.

More than a decade ago, Canada dropped more than \$100 million on a five-city, multiyear study of Housing First. Thousands of people participated. Some got housing right away, while others faced stricter requirements tied to treatment programs.

During the study's final months, about 62% of the Housing First group had permanent housing. An additional 22% were intermittently housed while 16% remained homeless. In comparison, only 31% of those in the "treatment as usual" group got permanent homes. A little less than a quarter — 23% — were in housing "some of the time" and nearly half were homeless. "Across all cities, (Housing First) participants obtained housing and retained their housing at a much higher rate than the treatment as usual" cohort, the authors of the "Cross-Site At Home/Chez Soi Project" wrote in their final report.

Studies in the United States have come to the same conclusion. Yet "it's clear we haven't resourced Housing First at the level it's needed," said Alex Visotzky, a policy fellow at the National Alliance to End Homelessness.

The largest stateside rollout of a Housing First initiative may be the Veterans Affairs Supportive Housing program, known as VASH, which pairs rental aid with supportive services through local VAs. Between 2010 and 2022, the

number of homeless veterans nationwide dropped by more than half, federal officials have said.

Other efforts have been narrower in scope. Last year, the city of San Diego got 59 people from one riverbed encampment into permanent housing using the same state funding at work in Lemon Grove. That amounted to about 45% of everyone at the site. (A city spokesperson said an additional 46 individuals, or 36% of the total, ended up in shelter programs.) Oceanside and Carlsbad began using their own Encampment Resolution Fund several months ago and early results have been promising.

Yet the state, like many local municipalities, has recently struggled with a budget deficit. It's not clear how long many funding streams may last. And the cost of housing in California seems to only be going up.

The first tour

On Nov. 12, Harrison left his encampment and climbed into a van. Others who had been sleeping in the same area slid in next to him. The van pulled out of a parking lot and headed toward downtown San Diego, where at least four apartment buildings were offering tours of open units.

"Do you guys have music preference?" asked the driver, an outreach worker with the city of La Mesa.

A man in the middle row spoke up. "A/C at some point — or windows down?"

The driver began playing the song "Windows Down" by the rapper Rucci. After a few moments the man clarified, "I was just requesting some air."

Allowing homeless people to choose where they live can feel both rote and revolutionary. On the one hand, who in California hasn't searched far and wide for an affordable place? Yet when it comes to the homeless population, some aid seems to follow the "take it or leave it" model.

This effort, in contrast, was inviting participants' opinions.

The van first pulled up to Alpha Square, a massive studio-apartment complex not far from Petco Park. The group walked into the lobby, met a tour guide and squeezed into an elevator. A Crisis House staffer looked up at Harrison. "I feel short," she said.

The group entered one of the building's 250-square-foot apartments. The unit already had a bed, a TV and some kitchen items. Harrison silently surveyed the furnishings.

He was nervous about the prospect of living downtown. Growing up in southern San Diego and East County meant the area felt foreign to him. Even the pace of life seemed disturbingly fast.

The second building was only a short walk away. That place had a food pantry and a staffer let everyone know about an upcoming Thanksgiving meal.

The third tour started on a dour note. As the group stood outside the complex, waiting to enter, a woman with gray hair walked out the front door. Upon seeing the potential tenants, she gestured toward a banner that listed a low monthly rent. "That's too much for this place," she announced. "I'm sorry, but I live here."

Harrison spun around in a circle. "Well, then, I don't even want to look at it."

The fourth location was Golden West, a former hotel with tiny rooms and shared bathrooms. Pro: Rent was \$850. Con: While climbing the main staircase, Harrison discovered that part of the ceiling hung well below 7 feet, which meant standing up straight was impossible.

A Brilliant Corners staffer said apologetically, "We can't put in a higher ceiling."

"I'll get a helmet," Harrison responded.

Back outside, Harrison reflected on everything he had seen. He liked the second building best but wasn't sold on any of them. There was another tour planned for the following morning, this time in East County. Perhaps he would find something better there.

Others appeared similarly hesitant. Earlier in the day, the van's driver asked if anyone had recognized a guy they had recently passed in a hallway. A man in a beanie said he had.

"See?" the driver responded. "You already know your neighbors."

"Yeah," said the man. Then he added, "That's part of the problem."

The blowback

Placing people from one encampment into the same building is a good way to preserve a community. It can also mean that communal habits, including any drug use, simply switch locations.

The fact that Housing First doesn't work for everyone — more than one person who has recovered from addiction has told The San Diego Union-Tribune that they needed rehab before a permanent home — is a sticking point for critics. Even many Democratic leaders in the California Statehouse think the policy has been taken too far. Earlier this year, an overwhelming bipartisan majority passed Assembly Bill 255, which would have allowed more funding to go toward sober-living programs, but the proposal was vetoed by Gov. Gavin Newsom.

The potential impact of that bill, however, pales in comparison to what's happening at the federal level.

Near the start of the year, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, or HUD, announced that it would not force homelessness initiatives “to use a housing-first program model.” A few months later, Trump issued an executive order calling for the end of “‘housing first’ policies that deprioritize accountability.” Both statements were preludes to what came in November: new rules governing billions of dollars worth of federal funding that made “treatment and recovery” programs a higher priority than housing initiatives.

Some advocacy organizations believe those changes could cause 170,000 vulnerable people who currently have housing to end up back on the street. The National Alliance to End Homelessness was one of several groups to sue over the rules in December. California and other states filed their own lawsuit around the same time.

For what it's worth, HUD partially justified the shift in priorities by citing a 2019 brief from the California Policy Lab, a research arm of the University of California system. Yet a link to that brief included in the federal proposal leads not to a denunciation of Housing First but to a note from the lab saying its “survey results” are “being misused.”

“Hundreds of studies — including our own — show economic pressures are the primary drivers of homelessness,” the statement reads, “that housing people ends homelessness, and that targeted financial assistance helps people at risk of homelessness stay stably housed.”

Absolutely none of this back-and-forth was on Harrison's mind as he prepared for a second day of apartment tours. He was just hoping his belongings weren't about to be thrown in a dumpster.

The second tour

Harrison was one of the people behind the Walgreens who heard the security guard warn of a coming sweep. He had just spent around \$45 on a 7-foot-long tent and wasn't keen on seeing it disappear.

When a van arrived, Harrison flagged down the driver, a Crisis House staffer named Harry Bass.

"Yo, we can't go right now," Harrison said. He explained the situation. Bass swore.

"Did they post a notice?" Bass asked. "They can't just come by and just snatch your stuff up, they gotta post a notice."

The group looked around. No paper warnings were visible on tents or fences. It wasn't even clear whether the cleanup had been scheduled by a local business or the city of Lemon Grove.

Bass made a phone call. When a cleaning crew did pull up a little later, one member said they were only there to grab trash in the parking lot, not tents on the hill. A different Crisis House staffer walked over to announce that the tents should be safe, at least for the moment, since the cleaners weren't with the city. "It's not them," she said. "Pretty sure."

Harrison decided to risk it. He and several others got into the van, and everyone spent the next several hours driving all over East County. One place they toured had recently been remodeled. Another came with a pool. Harrison's head never touched a ceiling. He liked what he saw.

While standing in the courtyard of one complex, LeeAnne Ward, a senior housing coordinator with Brilliant Corners, went over the program's rules. "For the first six months, your guys' rent is covered in full," she told the group. Regular communication with case managers was required. At the six-month mark, the rental support would begin tapering off.

"It's up to you guys to make some changes," an aid worker added, "we are just here to help you."

Harrison murmured an assent. He knew he needed a job. Until then, his main sources of income were the county's General Relief program and whatever he could bring in from recycling cans and bottles.

The group ate pizza outside the last stop of the day, a converted motel in Spring Valley. As people took slices, a can of Sprite fell to the ground and exploded. Someone grabbed the hissing can and tossed it onto the road. Later, Harrison

walked into the street, stomped on the can, picked up the flattened aluminum and placed it carefully in a plastic bag.

The lease

Not long after California and other organizations sued the federal government, HUD abruptly withdrew its proposal to overhaul homelessness spending.

“This withdrawal will allow the Department to make appropriate revisions” to the plan, in order “to account for new priorities,” according to a statement on the agency’s website.

A federal judge then moved to block HUD, at least temporarily, from implementing the changes. That case is ongoing.

In the meantime, homelessness continues to grow in San Diego County. Yet the rate of growth is slowing.

The regional task force releases statistics every month showing how many individuals fell into homelessness for the first time, as well as the number of homeless people who got housing. During 12 recent months — December 2024 through November 2025 — the good number (people housed) sometimes eclipsed the bad (newly homeless). Other months went in the opposite direction. All in all, homelessness grew by 517 individuals.

That doesn’t sound great until you consider that the 12 months prior saw homelessness countywide increase by 2,940 people. And the year before that? Nearly 5,000.

Officials believe several local initiatives are driving that improvement, including the Encampment Resolution Fund grants at play in Lemon Grove and elsewhere.

“Housing First works, but only when it’s paired with layered, flexible support and is not just Housing Only,” Sofia Hughes, a leader of the program in Oceanside, said during a recent homelessness conference in downtown San Diego. “It really is housing first, and then after that a lot of the real work starts.”

Harrison’s tent survived the threatened sweep. More importantly, he was able to give the tent away, because in mid-November Harrison signed a six-month lease for a room at the converted Spring Valley motel.

His new place has a refrigerator and a microwave and a bed large enough for his enormous frame. He was paired with a roommate he doesn’t know well, but

they each have their own space. Harrison hung Padres caps and a stuffed Pikachu (the Pokémon character) on his wall.

He still needs a paycheck. Harrison attended a job fair the other day with a Crisis House staffer, and plans to keep looking for work.

He also recently called the grandmother who helped raise him. The two hadn't spoken in months. "She's really upset with me," Harrison said, "because she wants me to be on my feet."

On the phone, Harrison explained that he had recently gotten sick and couldn't visit soon. But he wanted her to know where he'd be sleeping on Thanksgiving.