

As the Supreme Court weighs whether cities can criminalize sleeping outdoors or in tents, Los Angeles is attempting to combat homelessness with tiny homes criticized by some as ‘inhumane.’



By Ronda Kaysen

Reporting from Sun Valley, Calif.

Published June 15, 2024 Updated June 17, 2024, 11:31 a.m. ET

For two years, James Valdez lived in his S.U.V., so it was a relief when he moved into Branford Village, a community of tiny homes, in Los Angeles.

And then the flood came. And then another. During the first flood in August 2023, the water rose to the steering wheel of his S.U.V. Six months later in February, when water rushed through the complex again, residents were evacuated out of knee-high water to emergency shelters.

“You learn to live with it,” said Mr. Valdez, 58, whose 2016 GMC Acadia somehow survived ruin. “At least you have a bed.”

Roughly 150 recently homeless people live in the complex of tiny homes, part of Los Angeles’s effort to combat homelessness.



Mr. Valdez standing at the entrance of the tiny home he shares with a man he does not know. Stella Kalinina for The New York Times

At a time when the Supreme Court is weighing whether cities can criminalize sleeping outdoors or in tents, tiny homes offer a cheap and efficient way to erect shelters, delivering a stop gap fix to a national housing crisis. The country is short a staggering 7.3 million homes for extremely low-income renters, according to the National Low Income Housing Coalition. A record 12.1 million Americans pay more than half their income in rent, according to census data, and a record 653,100 Americans were homeless on a given night in January 2023.

Tiny homes for people experiencing homelessness now pepper the country — in Austin, Albuquerque, Madison, Seattle and St. Louis. And more are coming, as state and local governments, desperate to clear tent encampments, bet that such housing can provide more privacy, security and autonomy than traditional homeless shelters where multiple people sleep in a common area.

Outside Austin, people live in 200-square-foot homes with covered porches in a community with chicken coops, vegetable gardens and a convenience store. In Portland, Ore., one built exclusively for veterans has a putting green, ducks and a pavilion with a grilling station.

In Branford Village, the tiny homes are made of aluminum and fiberglass. At 64 square feet, each unit is a little longer than a twin-size bed and many squeeze two people into a space intended for one — a far cry from the quirky, infinitely photogenic cottages that have overtaken Instagram as a minimalist's vision of sustainable living. Residents shower and use the toilet in shared bathrooms.

A 2022 survey found that people experiencing homelessness were largely satisfied with tiny homes, particularly if they had autonomy and input into how the community operates. However, "If the stated goals of a project are: 'We need this thing to be durable, to be cleaned with a hose. We don't want people to get too comfortable,' you're not going to get all the incredible positive outcomes," said Todd Ferry, associate director of the Center for Public Interest Design at Portland State University, and an author of the survey.



In a space so small, no inch of space goes unused. Stella Kalinina for The New York Times

Branford Village is on an unenviable sliver of city-owned land in Sun Valley without trees or foliage, sandwiched between train tracks and a recycling center, off an industrial stretch of roadway in the San Fernando Valley. In the flight path of the Hollywood Burbank airport, the roar of planes is nearly as constant as the din from the recycling center, interrupted only by the thundering rattle of freight trains.

“The land was free,” said Orlando Ward, a spokesman for Volunteers of America Los Angeles, the nonprofit that operates Branford Village. A downpour can turn the community into a bathtub because the land — previously a city lot for heavy equipment — has poor grading and drainage, he said.

“The city of Los Angeles has worked very hard to brand these as tiny homes as if they are a housing solution, which they absolutely are not,” said Shayla Myers, a senior attorney at the Legal Aid Foundation of Los Angeles. “In reality, these are tiny sheds.”

But the small houses offer a way out of a tent or car in a high-priced city — a fixer-upper near Branford Village recently sold for \$800,000, and a two-bedroom rental is asking \$3,450 a month. Los Angeles has 14 tiny house communities, along highways, in parks and on the sites of former encampments.

“Interim housing and tiny homes are not the goal — but they absolutely have saved the lives of thousands and served as a path-through for many on their way to permanent housing,” Zach Seidl, a spokesman for Los Angeles Mayor Karen Bass, said in a statement.

Of the 369 people who have left Branford Village since it opened in February 2023, only 25 have moved into permanent housing. Of the others, 50 moved into another shelter, an institution or temporary housing; 92 returned to homelessness; and the remaining 202 found other housing arrangements, were asked to leave, or left for unknown reasons, according to the homeless services authority.



Julius Moore III, the Branford Village program manager, said even couples struggle to cope living in such tight quarters together. Stella Kalinina for The New York Times

‘How Much Longer Do We Have to Be Here?’

In just three steps, Mr. Valdez can walk from the front door to the back wall of his tiny home; in a single stride, he can reach his roommate’s bed from his bed. The space beneath Mr. Valdez’s bed stores shampoo, rain boots and flip flops. The rear wall doubles as a closet and a shelf for a television. Every day, Mr. Valdez navigates the claustrophobic dimensions with a man he knows only by circumstance. At times, the stench of another man’s body odor is overwhelming.

“You’ve got to understand, you’re living in a room with somebody else,” he said. “You don’t know what their mentality is. You don’t know what mental health issues they have. You don’t know nothing.”

Julius Moore III, the Branford Village program manager, said that even couples who nurtured romantic relationships while living in tent encampments bristle at sharing such intimate quarters — many of them leave without securing housing with the program’s assistance.

The hours are as long as the space is small. Mr. Valdez, who worked as a mover before a fall from a ladder in 2010 cut his working years short, has few distractions. His three young adult sons live nearby with their mother, but the transitional community does not allow guests. A van arrives daily delivering meals — sandwiches, salads, cereal and burritos — which Mr. Valdez eats on his bed or at one of the bright orange picnic tables.

“How much longer do we have to be here before we get housed?” said Mr. Valdez, who has an income of \$1,580 a month in disability benefits. The median rent in Sun Valley in May was \$2,700 a month, according to Zumper. Mr. Valdez has applied for countless apartments, but was never approved. He thinks landlords reject him because of his low income, poor credit and criminal record — he was sentenced to two years in prison for sexual battery some 30 years ago. (California landlords cannot deny housing because of a criminal record. Mr. Valdez is not on a state sex offender registry.) “They look at my criminal history and they say, ‘no,’” he said, adding, “Where do I go from here?”



Mr. Valdez, sitting in the S.U.V. where he slept for 18 months. He occasionally provides periodic taxi rides for friends and other Branford Village residents. Stella Kalinina for The New York Times

Volunteers of America Los Angeles aims to have residents “document ready” for permanent housing within 90 days of arrival, but available units are scarce.

“People are getting housed. People are moving along on that continuum,” Mr. Ward said. “Is there a bottleneck? Absolutely.”

Mr. Ward, who himself was homeless 25 years ago, sees an upside to the cramped, austere quarters. “The level of discomfort encourages people to make harder decisions about their life,” he said. “Until you’re sufficiently uncomfortable in an untenable situation, you’re not going to make a change.”

Mr. Valdez has set a deadline for the end of the year. “If nothing happens, it’s time to move on,” he said. “Go back to my car.”

‘A Viable Alternative’

Almost 25 years ago in Portland, a group of activists built a tiny home community in response to repeated sweeps of their encampments, and it has been self-governed ever since. Initially, the city of Portland and residents resisted expanding the model, which arose despite city policy not because of it. But as the homeless crisis worsened, and as the public warmed to the concept of tiny homes, Portland and other cities embraced the concept.

Then the coronavirus pandemic hit, and cities, desperate for socially distant shelter solutions, turned to companies like Pallet, a Washington-based manufacturer of tiny homes that can be flat-packed, delivered by truck and assembled in under an hour. An entire village can rise in hours or days.

Since 2017, Pallet has sold about 4,000 tiny homes in 86 cities in 25 states, including Branford Village. “I do hope that cities will think of this as a viable alternative to jailing people,” said Amy King, the chief executive of Pallet, who said that erecting a Pallet village generally costs between \$20,000 and \$60,000 per unit.

Los Angeles spends an average of around \$42,000 a bed to build its tiny homes, according to a 2022 A-Mark Foundation report, and \$60.50 a night, or \$1,815 a month, to operate them, according to the homeless services authority.

Ms. King described the flooding incidents at Branford Village as “historically unusual,” adding that Pallet homes, designed to resist mold, mildew and rot, can be reoccupied after a flood. “The good news is that these shelters were also designed and made to serve people displaced by natural disasters and function in disaster zones,” she said.



Roughly 150 people live at Branford Village, most of them sharing their tiny homes with a stranger. Stella Kalinina for The New York Times

Elizabeth Funk, a former tech industry executive who is now the chief executive of DignityMoves, a San Francisco nonprofit developer of tiny home communities, argues that if cities think about tiny homes as interim housing rather than temporary shelters, a two-year stay becomes a reasonable proposition — and a potentially positive one, too. “It’s a period of time where you really can settle in,” Ms. Funk said.

But Ms. Funk questioned doubling up, as they do in Los Angeles. “Talk about inhumane,” Ms. Funk said. “Of course you can’t be sharing a space like that.”

In one DignityMoves development, in downtown Santa Barbara, residents have their own rooms with a desk and a chair, air-conditioning, a window and a door that locks.



Sharon Hill arrived at Branford Village soon after it opened, after sleeping in her car at a truck stop in Palm Springs. Stella Kalinina for The New York Times

‘Feels Like a Prison’

Sharon Hill, 65, worked in customer service in Denver before losing her job and eventually her apartment. She moved to California and soon slept in her car in a truck stop in Palm Springs. Now, she lives at Branford Village and, unlike most of the other residents, does not share her tiny home because she uses a walker.

When the complex flooded in February, the water lapped in over the threshold of the door, soaking the boxes of food stacked beneath her bed. After she returned from the emergency shelter, where she slept on a cot that was so comfortable she wished she could bring it back with her, a caregiver helped her sort through the sodden items.

Staff regularly check rooms for contraband, like scissors or glass jars, seizing what doesn't belong. Residents returning to the complex must have their bags inspected for drugs and their bodies scanned with a hand-held wand. “It almost feels like a prison,” Ms. Hill said.

Ms. Hill, who moved to Branford Village since soon after it opened, thought she would be placed in permanent housing, something bigger than a shed, by now. But she's still waiting. “I'm beginning to lose hope that this is a housing program,” she said.



Branford Village has no community room, instead residents sit at picnic tables throughout the village. Stella Kalinina for The New York Times

A correction was made on June 17, 2024: An earlier version of this article misspelled an automobile model's name. It is the GMC Acadia, not Arcadia.

When we learn of a mistake, we acknowledge it with a correction. If you spot an error, please let us know at nytnews@nytimes.com. [Learn more](#)

Ronda Kaysen is a real estate reporter for The Times, covering the housing market and home design trends. [More about Ronda Kaysen](#)