

Reno Is Beating the Odds in Solving Homelessness

Number of unsheltered dropped by more than half in this Nevada city after large tent to house its homeless was built

By
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Tracy Whitmire, in a red top, earlier this year moved off the streets into the Nevada Cares Campus east of downtown Reno, Nev. PHOTO: JIM CARLTON/THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

RENO, Nev.—The “Biggest Little City in the World” is earning a new distinction: one of the few cities in the West to get large numbers of homeless off its streets.

The city teamed with Sparks, a neighboring city, and surrounding Washoe County to build a Nevada Cares Campus in 2021 that could accommodate more than 600 people in a giant tent and satellite sleeping pods. Since that year, the number of homeless living on the street has plummeted to 329 this year from 780, according to annual point-in-time counts.

The 58% drop is striking when compared with many other Western cities which have seen their unsheltered homeless populations grow or stagnate since the pandemic, amid soaring drug addiction and a federal

appeals-court order that prevents cities in the region from clearing streets without providing enough beds. California [has spent about \\$20 billion](#) over the last five years to combat the problem, yet still has half the nation's unsheltered homeless.

Once people are off the street and in the tent, the other part of Reno's approach kicks in: helping them find a job, access other services and move them into permanent housing. Other cities are taking notice.

"The Reno model is a good model," said Mayor Dave Bronson of Anchorage, Alaska, which is struggling to get [hundreds of people out of the cold](#), following a deluge of snowstorms. The Republican mayor tried to get such a tent in 2021, but it was shot down by the Democratic assembly on concerns such as it would be too prisonlike.

"We need a building that can be stood up as cheap as possible," he said.

In 2018, the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit found removing anyone camping in a public space in its Western U.S. jurisdiction when there isn't a shelter bed for them constitutes cruel and unusual punishment. That has made it difficult for cities such as Los Angeles and San Francisco to clear their streets.

Reno, though, has begun enforcing no-camping rules now that it has sufficient beds. As a result, the downtown casino district that used to be overrun with homeless has far fewer. "They are really cleaning it up," nearby resident Victoria Raffetto said on a stroll there one day in mid-November. "I used to hate to come down here unless I had to."

Jorge Ramirez-More had been on the street for a year before he moved into the county tent. There, he said, staff workers helped him find a job as a production operator. "It's like having someone on your side helping you in the most difficult time of your life," said Ramirez-More, an ex-convict who has suffered from substance-abuse problems. "They even provide rides to jobs, bus passes."



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After months of living in the Nevada Cares Campus, Jorge Ramirez-More was able to rent a room in a low-income housing complex.

After 15 months of living in the tent, Ramirez-More, 62 years old, was able to rent an 8-by-8-foot room inside one of several modular buildings in a low-income housing complex nearby. Reno trucked in the buildings, which were formerly part of a Wyoming seasonal-worker camp, before the pandemic to provide affordable housing for people after they leave a shelter. The rooms rent for \$555 a month.

Reno sprang into action in 2020 after its number of unsheltered homeless more than tripled amid pandemic-related job losses and soaring housing costs. Its existing shelter could hold 158 people. Officials said they realized they needed something bigger.

“We as a community felt like if we didn’t get ahead of this, we would fail like San Francisco,” said Par Tolles, a local real-estate developer and business leader. “So we on the public and private side put our heads together on what we could do about it.”

In early 2021, Reno, Sparks and Washoe County went in on building a horseshoe-shaped fabric structure almost the size of a football field. They acquired 15 acres a mile east of downtown Reno to put the 604-person capacity tent as part of a homeless campus that also included rows of tents on a former baseball field capable of holding another 50 people.

The initial cost for acquisition and development was about \$17 million, mostly in federal Covid-19 emergency funds as well as donations and other money. The campus will eventually include an adjacent healthcare clinic and other ancillary homeless-care buildings at a total cost of \$80 million in other federal funds, donations and local public funding.

The Nevada Cares Campus, which experienced some crime and other early snafus, has its detractors. Washoe County Commissioner Mike Clark calls the tent shelter a waste of money with no demonstrated ability to do more than temporarily get people off the street. “I think they are just warehousing people,” said Clark, who has voted against funding measures related to the homeless campus.

And the tent shelters don’t solve the larger problem in Reno and many other Western cities of growing shortages of affordable housing. The median price of a home in Reno has soared 30% to \$570,000 from \$440,000 in 2020, according to Realtor.com. The Wall Street Journal and Realtor.com are both owned by parent company News Corp.



Reno, Nev., teamed with neighboring Sparks and surrounding Washoe County to build the Nevada Cares Campus in 2021 that can accommodate more than 600 people in a giant tent and sleeping pods. PHOTO: COURTESY OF WASHOE COUNTY

Local officials said that the early problems have been resolved and that the campus is succeeding in getting homeless into permanent housing, although they acknowledged a need for more affordable housing.

When completed in May 2021, problems quickly surfaced. Temporary restroom and shower units brought in weren't sufficient for the numbers. It was later discovered the 4-inch-thick concrete floor wasn't strong enough to hold permanent restrooms and showers, so the project had to be re-engineered to build outside the tent, said Assistant County Manager Kate Thomas.

Initially, the tent faced theft and other crime issues, but officials said that was largely caused by understaffing. Thomas said staffing is now adequate. The rules are strict: Residents have to pass through a metal detector to enter, drugs and alcohol are prohibited and no visitors are allowed, including family.

"It feels like a prison sometimes," said Tracy Whitmire, a 45-year-old victim of domestic abuse who moved off the streets into the campus in February. "But we're safe and no one can harm me."

Police and advocates for the homeless are trying to get other people still living on the streets to come in out of the cold. "You may have to ask them eight or nine times until they say yes," said Grant Denton, a formerly homeless man who oversees what is called the "Safe Camp" of modular housing that has replaced the individual tents.

Walking on a sidewalk outside the campus one day in mid-November, Denton tried to convince Cindy Tillier to seek refuge inside. "I can't stay in that crazy place," the 65-year-old Tillier, who sleeps along railroad tracks, told Denton. "If you go in there, you'll eventually get your own place," Denton told the woman, who nodded but remained uninterested.



Grant Denton, a formerly homeless man, tries to convince Cindy Tillier to move off the streets into the Nevada Cares Campus. PHOTO: JIM CARLTON/THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Washoe County Sheriff Darin Balaam said that he has a team dedicated to homeless outreach throughout the county, and that through October of this year, it managed to get 121 people off the streets.

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What can other cities learn from Reno's approach to homelessness? Join the conversation below.

Former homeless people like Roscoe Roper spread the word. One of 29 ambassadors hired by the Downtown Reno Partnership to help keep the streets clean, Roper said he has convinced several people to find various housing and keeps working on more.

"Possible we can find you a better spot, bro?" Roper recently asked 41-year-old Donald Vigpond, who lay slumped against a building. "We can give you a ride to the Cares Campus."

"I'm just chillin'," said Vigpond, who shuffled away after saying he had been kicked out of the shelter before. Roper said he would ask him again the next time he sees him.

"A lot of my job," he said, "is just talking and not judging."