

Tiny Homes Save Lives

While Permanent Apartments Are Built

By: Sharon Lee

In 2016, at least 91 homeless men and women died on the streets of Seattle. Some causes of death? Exposure, poor health, violence, drug overdoses, suicides, and being struck by cars. On average, more people die in Seattle as a result of homelessness than are murdered.

Any time a new multi-family apartment building is planned to provide homeless housing, it takes three to four years to get through land assembly, financing, design, building permits and construction. We know that building more low-income housing is the real solution—but with thousands of vulnerable families and individuals on the streets today, tiny houses are a viable, low-cost, and dignified solution. And they save lives.

The Low Income Housing Institute (LIHI) is primarily known for developing low-income multi-family rental housing—we own and operate over 2,000 apartments and have over 500 units in our pipeline. We decided to undertake tiny houses as a quick and effective way to respond to the homelessness crisis.

LIHI develops the sites, oversees finances, handles construction of the tiny houses, and provides case management and other supportive services to move residents into long-term housing and employment.

The Tiny House Village concept was developed as an innovative crisis response to homelessness by moving people into tiny houses instead of tents. Being able to live in an insulated or heated tiny house instead of a tent is a huge improvement for families and individuals experiencing homelessness. Each tiny house costs \$2,500 in materials and is eight feet by 12 feet in area, about the size of a small bedroom. The homes have electricity, heat, ventilation, insulation, windows and, crucially, a lockable door. One of the main barriers homeless people face in stabilizing their lives is having a secure place for their belongings and documents.

We now have nearly two years' experience with five city-sanctioned sites. The sites accommodate about 400 people, including children, at any one time. Hundreds of people have been helped short term as they passed through and stayed for a night or a week and successfully moved on. Last year was a watershed for positive outcomes. In 2016, LIHI case managers moved 157 people into housing, helped 103 people obtain employment, and helped 30 people reunite with relatives or friends. [HNN](#)



(Image: Group of tiny houses. Courtesy of the Low Income Housing Institute.)



SHARON LEE

Sharon Lee is the founding executive director of the Low Income Housing Institute (LIHI), a non-profit based in Seattle. LIHI develops and operates housing for low-income and homeless people, and also provides a range of supportive service programs to its tenants. Lee is the winner of the 2017 Gold Nugget Award sponsored by Pacific Coast Builders, the largest and most prestigious competition of its kind in the nation.

She will be speaking about Tiny Homes and about Permanent Supportive Housing at the Florida Housing Coalition Conference on September 12, 2017.