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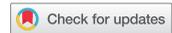
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# Reimagining Housing During Reentry: A Process Evaluation of the Village of Hope Transitional Housing Program

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## ABSTRACT

Village of Hope Transitional Housing Program is the first tiny home housing program in the United States for formerly incarcerated individuals. Unlike traditional congregate shelters, Village of Hope provides participants with individual housing units or “tiny homes,” in a neighborhood-like setting with an autonomous living space, amenities, case management, and referrals to services for up to six months. This process evaluation assesses the early implementation of Village of Hope, examining stakeholder planning and collaboration, program construction, and participant needs and perceptions. The study employs qualitative research methods to understand the major hurdles of implementing this housing model and the initial strides in easing reentry challenges for previously incarcerated individuals who would be experiencing homelessness. Findings reveal the achievements and challenges of implementing a tiny home program for the reentry population and are divided into six themes which outline the importance of public buy-in, program construction planning, autonomous housing benefits, service delivery, community engagement, and stakeholder collaboration. This paper concludes with recommendations for future tiny home programs designed for this population.

## KEYWORDS

Reentry; homelessness; transitional housing; tiny homes; process evaluation

## Introduction

Individuals who are released from prison face a dramatically higher risk of homelessness compared to the general public (Couloute, 2018; Metraux & Culhane, 2006). This increased risk of homelessness is credited to the confluence of challenges during the reentry process such as stigma of renting to individuals with criminal records (Clark, 2007; DeMarco, 2023), financial hardship (Harper et al., 2021), and substance use disorder or mental health problems (Francis et al., 2023) following periods of incarceration. Additionally, recent data has found that over 15% of incarcerated individuals were already experiencing homelessness at the time of their arrest (Couloute, 2018) often due to issues of substance abuse and/or mental health crises (Garcia-Grossman et al., 2022). Given the high risk of homelessness among those who have been incarcerated, providing assistance with a sustainable housing solution following release has become critical to reducing recidivism and technical parole violations (Fontaine, 2013; Jacobs & Gottlieb, 2020; Reece & Link, 2023).

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In November 2022, the Village of Hope Transitional Housing Program (hereafter referred to as Village of Hope), located in Bridgeton, New Jersey, became the first modular prefabricated tiny home village designed for those who are homeless and on parole. The program consists of six, 150 square foot buildings that are each equipped with a bed, shelves, heating and air conditioning, and a lockable door to ensure comfort and safety for program participants. A bathroom, shower, and kitchen are located on site alongside a common area with a television and staff offices. This program was designed and implemented by Gateway Community Action Partnership, a local nonprofit organization in Bridgeton New Jersey, The Kintock Group, one of New Jersey's leading halfway home organizations, The Reentry Coalition of New Jersey, and the New Jersey State Parole Board. The goal of Village of Hope is to help reentering individuals get a jumpstart toward stable housing, employment, and access to services by providing a safe, secure, and autonomous housing option during the reentry period.

The implementation of Village of Hope for New Jersey parolees sets a precedent for tiny home shelters designed for previously incarcerated individuals and demonstrates how these types of programs can be successfully implemented in towns and cities across the United States. This study evaluates the implementation of Village of Hope and observes how program stakeholders from several state and local institutions came together during this process. Data was collected over a span of 12 months and included in-depth interviews with program stakeholders, participants, site visits, and observations of stakeholder meetings. By capturing the perspectives of those directly involved, this study sheds light on the program's implementation process, the challenges and successes it faced, and recommendations for the future of transitional housing programs for the reentry population.

## Literature

### *Homelessness and incarceration in the United States*

Over the past 50 years, the United States has seen fluctuations in incarceration and homelessness. Increased homelessness began in the 1970s with the gradual deinstitutionalization of mental institutions in favor of community-resources, leading to growth of previously institutionalized patients living in chronic or sporadic housing situations (Kuno et al., 2000; National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2018). Subsequently, the economic recession of the early 1980s further increased financial hardship and led to budget cuts to the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) which would have allocated funding to subsidized housing and housing assistance programs (Jones, 2015). During this period of economic stress and increased homelessness, illicit drug markets, gun ownership, and violent crime rose in urban neighborhoods of color (Blumstein & Cork, 1996; Blumstein & Rosenfeld, 1998; W. Evans et al., 2018). The influx of violence shifted federal spending toward punitive policies especially for drug-related crimes which led to an expansion of prison funding with incarceration rates increasing from 139 to 756 per 100,000 people between 1980 and 2008 (Bagley, 1988; James, 2016; Sabol et al., 2009). Research conducted during this time has observed the growing link between homelessness and rising incarceration rates (Metraux & Culhane, 2004, 2006). A study examining this relationship during the late 1990s found that nearly a quarter of individuals listed in the Department of Homeless Services of New York had recently been incarcerated in prison or jail (Metraux & Culhane, 2006).

In recent years, the United States has reduced incarceration rates and pushed more individuals into community corrections (Augustine & Kushel, 2022; Geller & Curtis, 2011). Yet, the collateral consequences of incarceration make this population particularly vulnerable to homelessness and housing insecurity following their release (Augustine & Kushel, 2022; Geller & Curtis, 2011; Jacobs & Gottlieb, 2020; McKernan, 2017; Reece & Link, 2023; Roman & Travis, 2004). For example, during time spent in prison, individuals often become estranged from family members and other social ties (DeHart et al., 2018; McKernan, 2017). For those who have lost touch with this supportive network, finding a stable living situation is challenging because family members often provide individuals with the physical necessities following release, such as shelter and transportation (Herbert et al., 2015; Mowen et al., 2019). Additionally, individuals with a criminal record are often stigmatized by landlords, and real estate agents (Clark, 2005; D. N. Evans & Porter, 2015; Keene et al., 2018). In their study on rental decisions in New York, D. N. Evans and Porter (2015) found that landlords are significantly less likely to rent to individuals who have a criminal conviction. These findings are similar among real estate agents (D. N. Evans, 2016) highlighting that stigma toward people with a criminal record is a key challenge for previously incarcerated individuals during the reentry period.

Current policies used to address the growing rates of homelessness intend to provide individuals with temporary or subsidized housing to help with their release (Department of Housing and Urban Development, 2022; Travis et al., 2003). Housing projects consist of publicly funded buildings often operated by local housing authorities that offer free or subsidized housing for an extended period (Keene et al., 2018). While these programs are desirable, a space may be granted to anyone who qualifies as low-income or disabled making it difficult to gain approval for previously incarcerated individuals (Beck et al., 2023; Keene et al., 2018). Temporary housing shelters provide individuals with a place to spend the evening, but do not allow them to remain in the shelter during the day, forcing individuals to leave the shelter in the morning and are unable to return until the evening (Kozlowski, 2020). Additionally, temporary housing shelters are often far from local towns or city centers because of public disapproval which distances individuals from employment opportunities, health services, and other social supports like family members and friends (Kozlowski, 2020).

### ***Tiny home programs for the reentry population***

In recent years, tiny homes, which were originally designed as affordable housing to reduce inhabitants' carbon footprint have become to be used for vulnerable populations, including veterans, women and children experiencing housing instability, and now the formerly incarcerated (K. Evans, 2020). This housing model aims to provide individuals with a safe and autonomous space while transitioning to permanent housing and finding employment (K. Evans, 2020). Unlike dormitory-style shelters, tiny houses provide small private "shelters" or "cabins" that do not impose curfews dictating when individuals come and go (Kozlowski, 2020). Additionally, tiny home sites are designed to be integrated with the larger surrounding community (Jackson et al., 2020) which can help individuals access work or school, support from family and friends, social services, and community activities. In addition, these homes provide individuals with their own space which can protect against theft or violence, a common occurrence in congregate housing shelters (Kushel et al., 2003).

While Village of Hope is currently the only program specifically oriented toward the reentry population, the unique benefits of tiny homes align help to address the range of challenges that occur among individuals who are reentering into society (Abrantes, 2024; Coleman, 2018; Gold et al., 2021; Jackson et al., 2020; Kozlowski, 2020; Scally et al., 2020). Research shows that tiny home programs provide participants with a sense of stability to help them feel grounded during periods of uncertainty (Gold et al., 2021; Scally et al., 2020). Additionally, tiny home programs focus on providing individuals with an autonomous space that allows for a safe and sanitary environment to protect against disease, a concern that was salient among overcrowded jail and prison populations living during the COVID-19 pandemic (Calhoun et al., 2022; Craig et al., 2023). Since the pandemic, the implementation of non-congregate tiny home shelters has been on the rise to address growing rates of homelessness in a manner that preserves the health and safety of those experiencing homelessness (Calhoun et al., 2022). Cities like San Francisco even changed their municipal housing laws to allow for tiny homes to be implemented during COVID-19 lockdown measures (Saracevic, 2016). These benefits of tiny home shelters for homeless populations suggest that programs could also address the challenges that the reentry population faces (Abrantes, 2024).

Despite this range of benefits, research has identified some complications that arise during the implementation of tiny home programs. For example, local community members often pushback on tiny home housing programs being implemented in their neighborhood (Jackson et al., 2020). This community pushback is often referred to as Not in My Back Yard (NIMBY) mentality and can lead to delays in implementation, weakened community support for program participants, and challenges in obtaining funding if not properly addressed (Page & Travis, 2011). Jackson et al. (2020) examined the implementation of the “The Dwellings” project, a tiny home village for low-income residents of Tallahassee, Florida. They found that community members voiced concerns that the homes would lead to changes in property value in the area due to increased homeless populations in their neighborhood which led to a delay in program construction and implementation. To overcome these concerns, stakeholders held community meetings to inform residents of the difference between tiny home villages and temporary homeless shelters and provide a space for neighbors to voice concerns. These outreach efforts improved community members’ attitudes toward “The Dwellings” and allowed for construction of the program to continue reinforcing the importance of integrating community voices during the implementation of tiny home programs (Jackson et al., 2020).

Other research found that the development of tiny home villages led to disagreements between program stakeholders on who is responsible for addressing community homelessness (Scally et al., 2020). In their study of the implementation of a program in Bozeman, Montana, Scally et al. (2020) found that stakeholders disagreed on the roles that organizations would play in addressing the root causes of homelessness, which led to an “uneven sense of responsibility for addressing housing needs” and created potential gaps in service delivery for program participants (Scally et al., 2020, p. 54). These findings reinforce the importance of collaboration between program stakeholders to identify the needs of program participants in the area and come up with coordinated solutions that improve service delivery and prevent cycles of homelessness in the area.

The Village of Hope program presents a novel approach to assessing the barriers for homeless individuals during the reentry process. Drawing from previous research, this

process evaluation will use qualitative research methods to explore the challenges and achievements during the planning and implementation stages of the program and the first 6-months of providing transitional housing for criminal justice involved individuals.

## **Methods**

### ***Study design and participants***

This qualitative process evaluation draws from a series of data sources collected before, during, and following the construction and implementation of the Village of Hope program. The majority of the data sources are drawn from a series of one-on-one interviews with stakeholders and residents between June 2022 and February 2023. Stakeholders are defined as any individual, group, or organization that is impacted by or can impact policies and programs of Village of Hope, including current Village of Hope staff (Greenwood & Anderson, 2009; Kok et al., 2015). Additionally, researchers reviewed information from a preliminary informational survey on the main facts about the program, sat in on several standing stakeholder meetings, conducted a site visit of the program, and analyzed gray material such as news articles, program documents, and government documents. This study was approved by the HML Institutional Review Board (#2013).

### ***Preliminary survey***

A preliminary 59-item survey was constructed to gather initial information on the program itself. The questions were adapted from a survey exploring the feasibility of tiny homes in Alameda County, California (Coleman, 2018). This survey was sent to Village of Hope's Project Coordinator and Gateway Community Action Partnership staff.

### ***Stakeholder interviews***

To learn about the planning and implementation process of Village of Hope, the researchers conducted a series of interviews with program stakeholders of Village of Hope. Interview participants were selected using a purposive and snowball case sampling method to recruit individuals who are relevant to the implementation of the Village of Hope program implementation and/or criminal justice and housing policy in the town of Bridgeton, and the state of New Jersey. To identify initial stakeholders to interview, the researchers created a spreadsheet of all individuals who were directly or indirectly involved in the implementation of Village of Hope. This list included Village of Hope on site staff and individuals from local government, criminal justice agencies, housing agencies, nonprofit organizations, and initiatives to address homelessness in Bridgeton, Cumberland County, and the state of New Jersey. Contact information was located from online public websites. Following each interview, the researchers asked interviewees if there is anyone, they believe would be a key stakeholder to speak with and if they could share their contact information.

Interviewees were contacted either over the phone or via e-mail. Once interviewees agreed to be interviewed, researchers responded with possible interview times, asked for their preferred format of interview, and sent them the informed consent form for their review. Before scheduling the interview, interviewees were asked to read and sign

the informed consent form which provided details of the process evaluation and gave individuals the option to decline being interviewed, recorded and/or quoted in future reports. Interviews took place by phone, Zoom or e-mail. The interviews were audio recorded if permission by the interviewee was given. Interviews that took place over Zoom were transcribed by the automatic transcription service provided on Zoom software. Interviews conducted over the phone were transcribed using Sonix transcription service. If the interviewee did not want to be recorded, the researcher took notes on the computer or with pen and paper while the interview took place. Interviews with stakeholders lasted between 30 and 60 min. A total of 11 stakeholders contributed to these findings.

Interviews followed an open-ended interview question template developed by the researchers. Interview questions covered over several topics including the interviewees' role in the implementation process, the ongoing process of implementation, the major implementation challenges, the need for tiny homes in Bridgeton and the future of tiny homes in New Jersey. They were also given time to discuss anything they felt was important to the process and implementation of Village of Hope.

### ***Participant interviews***

The first program participant moved into the program in late November 2022. Program participants qualified for the program if they were on parole in New Jersey, were being released from prison or a halfway home without stable housing and were not a sex offender according to New Jersey Department of Law & Public Safety. Because Village of Hope was still in its pilot stage at the time of data collection, most program participants who were living at Village of Hope were referred to the program by The Kintock Group, the co-operator of Village of Hope and a halfway home organization close to the site, or their parole officer. The term program participant, as opposed to client or resident, is used because it underscores that the program is a transitional housing program rather than a residential program or another permanent housing program.

Program participants were interviewed on the Village of Hope property and were recruited by the lead staff member on the premises. Each researcher conducted two interviews with Village of Hope participants and were provided with a private location to conduct interviews, the kitchenette, and an uninhabited tiny home. A total of four interviews were conducted with Village of Hope participants. Participants were not provided with incentives to participate in this study.

All participants signed an informed consent form prior to conducting the interview. Consent forms were audibly explained to the participants. The researchers provided details on the process evaluation, and informed participants that they could skip questions, leave the interview at any time or decline being recorded and/or quoted. All identifying names were removed from the participants' transcriptions. Interviews with program participants were conducted in person and lasted from 25 to 45 min. While the interviews were largely guided by the open-ended interview instruments, a semi-structured interview approach was adopted to draw out rich descriptions of experiences rather than cursory answers (Rubin & Rubin, 2005).

## **Data analysis**

The interviews with both stakeholders and program participants provided insight into the challenges and achievements of the implementation of Village of Hope. Interviews were analyzed using line-by-line coding techniques and sorted based on major themes identified by the researchers. These themes were determined through recurring conversation topics and organized in an Excel spreadsheet. Key information was identified through relistening to interviews and reading audio transcripts. All pages of interview transcripts, notes, and documents were analyzed. It should be noted that a limitation of this process evaluation was the small sample size of participants to interview. When the study was initially planned, it was expected that all six homes would be in use and that the first group of participants would have moved out to stable housing allowing an additional six new participants to be interviewed during the 12-month evaluation. Because of the delay in the opening of Village of Hope, the researchers were only able to interview the first four participants.

## **Analysis of grey materials**

To contextualize the process of this program implementation, gray materials like news articles, program documents, government documents, and reports were also analyzed. The move to implement tiny homes in New Jersey has been a longstanding proposal reflected through news reports and government documents. Some materials were provided to the researchers by Village of Hope staff and other stakeholders such as ongoing progress reports, memos to and from various stakeholders, and program rules for Village of Hope participants. Other documents, including media reports from 2014 to 2023, were accessed by the researchers online via free and paid sites such as Newspapers.com. This information is synthesized and described throughout the major themes of the findings and discussion sections.

Data was also collected during the February 2023 visit to Village of Hope when researchers were able to tour the program site which included six tiny homes, a communal building, bathroom, and kitchenette. In addition, the researchers visited other areas of Bridgeton including the area where the program was originally planned to be implemented and commercial areas discussed in the interviews. Finally, the researchers attended four Zoom meetings with stakeholders. Three of the meetings covered several topics related to the design and implementation process of the Village of Hope program, while the fourth was hosted by Village of Hope's tiny home manufacturing company and discussed developing transitional housing for those reentering into their community with key stakeholders involved in Village of Hope implementation.

## **Findings**

There are six major themes from the interview findings. Key themes include (1) NIMBYism and public buy-in, (2) challenges of tiny home construction, (3) benefits of autonomous housing, (4) addressing basic needs of participants, (5) participant isolation and community engagement, (6) stakeholder collaboration when overcoming hurdles. These themes are drawn from interviews with both stakeholders and program participants and analyses of

**Table 1.** Themes and data source.

Theme	Stakeholders	Participants
NIMBYism and public buy-in	x	
Challenges of tiny home construction	x	
The benefits of autonomous housing	x	x
Addressing the basic needs of participants	x	x
Participant isolation and community engagement	x	x
Stakeholder collaboration when overcoming hurdles	x	

grey materials. It is important to note that some themes contain insights solely from stakeholders perspectives, while others are drawn from both program participants and stakeholders. This is because much of the implementation process of a tiny home program does not explicitly involve program participants. For an outline of themes and the data sources related to each theme see [Table 1](#).

### ***NIMBYism and public buy-in***

One of the key challenges that emerged during the implementation of Village of Hope was agreement on a location where the programs could be implemented. During the initial planning stages, the village was intended to be located in an area adjacent to a residential street in the center of Bridgeton, New Jersey. At this early period of the program planning, Village of Hope was not intended exclusively for previously incarcerated individuals and was instead designed for individuals living in Bridgeton who were homeless. It was designed to be located next to a local food pantry and a short distance from the main commercial street, which would provide residents with easy access to food and community engagement. After the Mayor of Bridgeton announced this location, a local newspaper published a news article which has now been removed from public access, which describes Village of Hope and provides the exact address where the homes would be implemented. Following the publication of this article, residents of the adjacent street attended the city's community council meeting and voiced concern over having the six tiny homes located across the street from their neighborhood. The immediate resident backlash led the cancellation of plans to implement Village of Hope near a residential area.

The “not in my back yard” mentality, better known as NIMBY, stems from public disapproval of new developments, such as transitional housing programs that support individuals who have recently been released from prison or who are experiencing homelessness. This pushback reflects public fear that the housing program will lead to increased crime rates in the neighborhood, reduce local property values, and impact the overall quality of life of the area. Many stakeholders noted that this is undoubtedly a common challenge for programs such as these:

Unfortunately, it is a common problem that whatever you do in the world of supportive housing . . . . the community where that lies can be a problem (Stakeholder A)

Because the early plan was not designed for previously incarcerated individuals, some stakeholders noted the public's fear that the program would not have any restrictions or safety protocols. Several stakeholders voiced that the public may fear that these individuals could be “criminals” and expressed concern that the presence of the homes would lead to

theft or violence in the program area. Stakeholder B points out that this is a common fear for local community members:

It's a valid concern for people.... You don't know if you're going to have sex offenders you don't know if you're going to have criminals . . . I think that's what really set in for them. (Stakeholder B)

These fears have long been part of the many challenges of implementing social programs in small tight-knit communities, even though research indicates that well-designed housing programs do not necessarily have negative impacts on neighborhoods (Galster et al., 2002). Following public pushback, Village of Hope stakeholders reached out to local initiatives to inquire about other locations they could implement the program within the city limits of Bridgeton. It was through this shift in location that program leaders got in touch with two leading reentry programs in New Jersey to ask if there was a space on their property to implement Village of Hope. This agreement provided additional funding to Village of Hope and shifted the target population from homeless individuals in Bridgeton to homeless individuals being released on parole in New Jersey according to Stakeholder H. Village of Hope was relocated to land owned by the Kintock Group situated on the outskirts of Bridgeton and down the street from Kintock halfway homes.

A key element of Village of Hope is that it is a pilot program. Therefore, many of the NIMBY-related challenges that stakeholders faced during the implementation phase were viewed as lessons for future tiny home programming in New Jersey. One stakeholder expressed confidence in the future of implementing tiny home villages because they believed that the public would start to recognize the long-term successes of Village of Hope:

I truly believe that as we move forward with these six units, people can see that it works and that it's non-threatening. And so, this is really a demonstration to the naysayers that this is a good idea and can work. (Stakeholder C)

### ***Challenges of tiny home construction***

The construction and implementation process of any housing program presents significant decision-making challenges among stakeholders on how to overcome certain obstacles that arise . Stakeholders note that the obstacles faced during the planning and construction of tiny homes sets them apart from other types of housing and reentry programs.

. . .one of the things with tiny homes is that every project is different and, there are soft costs involved in startup and there are hard costs involved in acquisition of the homes. (Stakeholder B)

Tiny home housing programs are designed to be cost-effective and easy to build. This is because stakeholders may be responding to an immediate health and safety emergency, such as COVID-19 or severe weather patterns (Calhoun et al., 2022; Pallet, 2021). Given the many different types of tiny homes in the United States, stakeholders needed to make decisions on the best manufacturing company that would fit the needs of Village of Hope. Additionally, to demonstrate the feasibility of tiny homes in comparison to dormitory style housing programs, Village of Hope needed to be cost-effective, easy to construct, and able to maintain all relevant health and safety requirements (Pallet, 2022). Stakeholders spent time researching different companies and decided on a company based in Washington State which they identified as one of

the leading providers of rapid-response housing specifically designed for homeless populations. This company offered an affordable range of products and designs that could be erected quickly with minimal labor and equipment.

The process of constructing Village of Hope in the Bridgeton area introduced a new layer of challenges. New Jersey State Housing requires a minimum 150 square footage for new homes and bedrooms, which is larger than other state or municipal housing codes. Village of Hope shelters under the selected manufacturing company are 100 square feet. Therefore, stakeholders needed to come up with a solution to avoid violating the New Jersey state housing code. They decided to place the tiny homes on a bumper-pull trailer with wheels, allowing them to be registered as mobile homes. This switched approval from the Department of Housing to the Department of Transportation and allowed some flexibility with the size of the homes. Mobile homes are defined as units that are “built on a chassis [and] designed without a permanent foundation” that can be “us[ed] as a conveyance upon public streets and highways,” as identified in Chapter 212 section 1 of the General Legislation of Bridgeton, New Jersey (City of Bridgeton, NJ, 2023).

To position homes on a functioning chassis, stakeholders constructed custom trailers that would fit the exact size and dimension of the purchased shelters. Next, because the homes are lightweight they then needed to be staked down to prevent them from tipping over during severe weather conditions. Finally, a vinyl lattice skirting was constructed along the bottom of the shelters to hide the wheels, keep animals out, and maintain ventilation. While the supplies and construction of the homes are considerably cheaper than building a house, with each one costing around \$15,000 including installation, stakeholders note that the real expense came from navigating the zoning and housing codes of the state and developing the infrastructure for the homes.

... the homes themselves are designed to be \$15,000 or less ... We paid around \$10,000 for each of them. But the real expensive part was navigating everything, so having to do the trailers, having to do the site lighting, having to do the extra security measures (Stakeholder B)

After completing construction in Spring 2022, stakeholders were confident that participants would be ready to move in as soon as May 2022. However, Village of Hope still needed to receive the permits for the installation of electric lines and plumbing for the homes, bathroom facilities, and communal building. This process took much longer than expected which Stakeholder K noted put a damper on the hopes to get Village of Hope in operation by the Summer of 2022. the move-in date was pushed back from May 2022 to November 2022 which meant that the participants moved into Village of Hope during the winter months, rather than the warm summer months.

### ***The benefits of autonomous housing***

Tiny home villages for transitional housing interventions are intended to stand out from traditional congregate housing shelters. In most congregated housing models, individuals are required to leave the area in the morning and may not come back until the evening. Because of this, individuals do not have a private place to spend time during the day. Cumberland County is a rural area of Southern New Jersey which means that community involvement and commercial areas are difficult to reach if an individual does not have reliable transportation. According to stakeholders, the closest

homeless shelter to Bridgeton is located many miles away from any commercial area. Stakeholders remark that this is especially a challenge for individuals who are homeless in rural areas:

... it's miles away from where they're used to being and there are stipulations you can be in the shelter, and if you want to come into town where you're familiar ... Where's the bus transportation coming from? You know, because we're in a rural area, so it's not like being in a city where you have buses running on a regular basis (Stakeholder C)

Because of these challenges, Village of Hope stakeholders commented on the benefits of tiny home models that do not impose curfews on individuals and are located in accessible areas. They note that allowing individuals to have their own temporary space can assist them with making long-term goals for the future. Many of them point out that having a stable place for them to put their belongings and a safe place where they can sleep can help them to access other services and address other needs. Stakeholder J notes that this type of intervention is particularly beneficial for individuals during the reentry process because they allow individuals to have a “place to call home at the end of the day” which “gives them the ability to slow things down.” Stakeholders note that these reflections are particularly important during the reentry process especially for those who are seeking employment and accessing mental health resources:

I think shelter is the basic on the underpinning of reentry. Without shelter, employment and some of the other necessary things that someone may have to do — if they have mental health, counseling, or substance abuse counseling at community programs... It's kind of difficult to be consistent when you don't have a place to stay. (Stakeholder D)

Program participants note that autonomous shelter provides stability for services such as mental health counseling and substance abuse programs. One program participant noted that he has weekly Zoom therapy sessions which he was able to do from the tiny home with a tablet provided by the program staff.

Program participants also remark on how Village of Hope improves on the challenging conditions in congregate housing shelters. In one case, an individual states that their previous time living in a congregate shelter involved many people living in one room which he described as particularly “tight quarters.” They additionally state how grateful they are to be in the position to live in these homes, one participant stating that: “[having shelter] gives me hope to, you know, get ahead in life and take full advantage of the opportunity to do better.” Given that the homes are designed specifically for individuals who are previously incarcerated, it is important to identify the unique benefits of autonomous housing for these individuals to develop programs and services for reentry.

### ***Addressing the basic needs of participants***

Because Village of Hope residents are on parole, many of them already have social services in place such as mental health counseling, substance abuse treatment, and employment assistance as required by their parole stipulation. Outside of these larger service provisions, Village of Hope also provides residents with the day-to-day amenities required for addressing their basic needs, as stated by stakeholders. These amenities include televisions, tablets, phones, food, and washers and dryers which allow individuals to be able to

apply to jobs, have a consistent phone number where they can be contacted, receive some kind of entertainment during the day, and have clean clothes. The program also provides a clean restroom, basic toiletries, and a shower for participants to maintain personal hygiene. In addition, program staff ensure that individuals can receive any necessary documents such as identification and/or birth certificates to be able to apply for social service benefits. Stakeholders have pointed out that addressing these day-to-day need, which are often overlooked for individuals during challenging transitions, is critical to helping program participants focus on larger goals such as finding long-term housing and employment:

My main focus, I can't drive this home enough is I want to eliminate any barriers that pertain to the day-to-day living. I just need them to focus on finding competitive employment and focusing on housing. (Stakeholder E)

Village of Hope staff set up a kitchenette equipped with a television, microwave, and refrigerator for participants to use at their leisure. An outdoor barbecue is also located on the premises. Village of Hope provides individuals with weekly food, primarily microwavable meals, as well as personal plates, cups, and silverware that they can keep in their home. Providing participants with weekly food keeps them from having to go to food pantries located approximately two miles away from the program.

Stakeholders believe that providing these comforts and services allows for participants to develop trust toward program staff and encourages them to voice to stakeholders what they need overtime to help their employment seeking process. Village of Hope staff reiterate the importance of providing individuals with a space to express their needs and grievances:

I don't want them to feel like they're an institution. I want them to feel comfortable coming to me and saying: "Hey, I have this issue" or "Hey, how can I do this?" [When] they start feeling comfortable . . . we can have this dialogue. (Stakeholder E)

By allowing participants to identify their pressing needs instead of being over-scheduled by the case manager, Village of Hope staff argue that they can best implement an effective long-term program that replicates living freely and helps parolees reintegrate into society, which in turn encourages positive behavior. Program participants identified the obvious attempts that stakeholders took to make their life more comfortable following periods of confinement. One participant communicates their stress while incarcerated when compared to their life at Village of Hope:

I was in the prison cell in the state prison for a little over two years, and I've been here for three months. So, it's, it's like night and day. You're not, you're not confined here . . . you have quite a bit more freedom (Participant A)

This noted difference between being incarcerated and living at Village of Hope captures one of the main goals of Village of Hope: to not feel like they are living in an institution, to feel free and capable of asking for what they want without having every moment of their day scheduled with programming. Some residents identify with this freedom, acknowledging the benefits of the services that are consistently provided to individuals:

It's just like it's given me hope . . . it gives me hope to, you know, get ahead in life and take full advantage of the opportunity to do better (Participant B)

Because the Village of Hope population have been previously incarcerated, staff members make sure that individuals feel free to ask for what they need, access services, and live as free individuals outside of the criminal justice system. Nevertheless, some participants noted some challenges with the program itself.

### ***Participant isolation and community engagement***

Throughout program implementation, stakeholders reiterate that engagement with the community is imperative to developing a successful housing program that effectively addresses the needs of Village of Hope residents.

Four walls and a roof do not solve a person's problems getting reintegrated. They need a job. They need connections to community, all those things. And we have to address them all in order for people to be successful, whether they're reintegrating from the justice system or homelessness. (Stakeholder F)

Stakeholders communicate that this program is intended to make them feel in control and able to ask for anything that they might need to make their stay more comfortable. This encouragement of participants to communicate needs sets Village of Hope apart from prison and halfway-home settings.

During the site visit, researchers noted that some participants had concerns about the availability and accessibility of public transportation revealing a disconnect between the goals of the program and the feedback from program participants. While some participants expressed appreciation at the opportunity to live at Village of Hope, they revealed that they felt isolated from the community or what is familiar to them. After public pushback, Village of Hope was relocated to the outskirts of Bridgeton, down the street from the South Woods State Prison and Kintock halfway home facilities. Participant B, who did not wish to be recorded stated that he could hear the loudspeaker coming from the halfway home facilities which are not far from the Village of Hope site. He stated that it wakes him up and remarked a discomfort with hearing the daily announcements that he heard every day when he was living in the halfway home facilities.

Participants note that the discomfort with this setting is intensified because there are no stores or commercial areas within a mile of the program which made them feel bored and disconnected from normal life. In some cases, program participants stated frustration with the housing location because of the isolation and inaccessibility to areas that are familiar to them.

Transportation [has been] my biggest issue because I'm so far from town and it's so far just to get to the bus stop . . . . And being that I don't have a job at the moment, it's hard to even get bus fare to get anywhere, you know? (Participant C)

Despite many expressing feelings of isolation and frustration, Participant B pointed out some of the benefits of the location. He expressed gratitude for not having to leave in the morning, noting that the program is "keeping [them] from the streets" suggesting that living separated from the community may help them stay away from situations where they have to spend their days on the streets.

When this topic of isolation was brought up to Stakeholder G, the mayor of Bridgeton, he expressed that transportation could be improved by rerouting the buses to pass by the

Village of Hope site and pick up individuals who wanted to go into town. These ongoing updates of the programs reinforce the importance and effectiveness of feedback loops to help identify areas for improvement.

### ***Stakeholder collaboration when overcoming program hurdles***

Collaboration is a “cooperative venture based on shared power and authority . . . [and] it assumes power based on knowledge or expertise as opposed to power based on role or function” (Kraus, 1980, p. 12). On the other hand, coordination, which is more commonly seen in reintegration programs, is a “sequenced plan of action agreed to by all parties, delineating who will do what, when and for what duration” (Mellow et al., 2013). The organization and implementation of Village of Hope required a collaborative working relationship with the public, private, nonprofit service providers, and the community. Additionally, ongoing collaboration during the implementation of the program allowed for multiple streams of funding to sustain the program overtime. Overall, stakeholders noted that this collaboration was fundamental to ensuring that the program operated smoothly, offering a unique example of local nonprofits and criminal justice agencies coming together to construct an innovative program:

... this project I think is an example of parties working together to build the bridges, bring together the systems, and make it work (Stakeholder J)

Some individuals remark that this collaboration is rare when it comes to criminal justice policy and implementation. In one instance, a stakeholder notes that community agencies are often working alone or “in silos”, barring them to seeing homelessness and reentry as a larger community issue that requires the support of many different agencies to develop a shared solution:

Many times, you have agencies who are working in silos, and they’re not working together on the problem and also perhaps don’t even see the problem in the same way. (Stakeholder C)

Stakeholder C highlights the diverse perspectives that stakeholders may have toward addressing the needs of previously incarcerated homeless individuals and reinforces the importance of stakeholder collaboration during the early stage program implementation.

## **Discussion**

Village of Hope is the first tiny home program in the United States to provide transitional housing to individuals who are reentering into society following incarceration. Given the novelty of this program, the findings from this study offer critical insights on the challenges and achievements that arise when addressing the needs of previously incarcerated individuals who are residing at transitional tiny home program. First, recurring themes from stakeholder interviews demonstrate that the community context, such as public concerns of program implementation and housing codes present unique challenges for early phases of tiny home implementation. Second, the findings show that establishing solid collaboration among stakeholders helps to overcome these challenges throughout the entire implementation process.

Aligned with previous research, NIMBYism and public pushback proved to be an obstacle for the Village of Hope program (Sally et al., 2020). In previous evaluation studies of tiny home programs, researchers found that stakeholders often developed strategies for community outreach to leverage public buy-in for the programs. For example, Jackson et al. (2020) found that stakeholders held local meetings where they explained the benefits of tiny home programs and ensured that the program would not pose a threat to the community. Similarly, Sally et al. (2020) highlighted that stakeholders went door-to-door to speak with residents about their concerns with the implementation of the program and identify ways in which stakeholders can include community members in program development and implementation. To the best of our knowledge, Village of Hope stakeholders did not undertake any kind of public outreach before deciding on the location of the program.

Practitioners and researchers have developed several tools to gain community support during the planning process of an “unpopular project” (Page & Travis, 2011). In their Toolkit for Overcoming Community Resistance to Reentry Housing, Page and Travis (2011) suggest that program leaders need to identify impacted community members and be “continuously accessible” to them by attending local neighborhood meetings and making themselves known among the larger community. Several stakeholders felt that there was little they could do to overcome public pushback. However, others discussed that the program is still in its infancy and are confident that over time the success of Village of Hope could help Bridgeton and New Jersey residents recognize the benefits of tiny home programs and learn to accept them in their communities.

The NIMBYism mentality among some vocal community residents complicated the process of community integration for program participants. In particular, some participants found it difficult to do laundry or find employment because the town center was far away from the Village of Hope program. Previous research points out that a benefit of tiny home villages, as opposed to congregate housing, is the neighborhood-like quality which fosters a sense of community among participants and connects them to the larger municipal area (Jackson et al., 2020). For Village of Hope participants, these connections could be particularly valuable to providing support for those who have spent extended periods incarcerated. Therefore, in addition to garnering neighborhood trust, future tiny home interventions serving the reentry population need to ensure that participants have convenient access to the surrounding community.

Findings also reveal the importance of stakeholder collaboration during the entire implementation of Village of Hope. Throughout every stage of the process, stakeholders sought to work outside of their “silos” to best address the ongoing challenges that arose. When reflecting on this collaboration, stakeholders noted that their comradery felt rare given the mixed responsibility that local criminal justice agencies and nonprofit organizations take on when addressing the challenges of reentry and cycles of homelessness. These findings contrast with previous evaluations on tiny home interventions such as the Housing First Village in Bozeman, Montana. For example, Gold et al. (2021) found that community stakeholders struggled to organize how each organization would contribute to service delivery of tiny home residents to assist them with gaining more stable housing and employment. Drawing from the findings of this study, future programs should develop a coordinated plan that identifies how all community organizations can address the unique needs of the tiny home residents prior to implementation.

There are some key limitations to this study. First, because this is a pilot program being undertaken in a small town in rural New Jersey, the sample size of the program is notably small and therefore should not be generalized to other programs. Nevertheless, the results offer key considerations for practitioners and policymakers involved in future interventions that are similar to Village of Hope. Next, the opening of Village of Hope was pushed back by nearly 6 months leading to a delay in the time frame in which the process evaluation could be completed. Because of this delay, the researchers were not able to visit the site when all the homes were occupied and instead had to rely on the perceptions of program participants who had only recently moved into the homes. Only four program participants were interviewed, some of whom had only been living in at the program for a few weeks. Future research should interview program participants after they have been living in the homes for an extended period to receive feedback on the longevity of services provided to individuals. Finally, it is important to note that several changes occurred following the completion of this evaluation as program staff identified key issues and sought to address them immediately. These immediate changes are due to the small size of the program and the small community in which the program was implemented. Therefore, our findings may not reflect the current state of the program and the later stages of its implementation. Future process evaluations of small programs such as Village of Hope should lengthen the time spent collecting data to ensure that findings capture all stages of implementation.

## Conclusion

Clean and stable housing is essential for individuals during the reentry process. However, many housing shelters are not oriented specifically toward these populations and therefore cannot address the unique needs and experiences of these individuals. The Village of Hope tiny home program is the first autonomous tiny home program to be implemented for individuals who are on parole in New Jersey. Identifying the major challenges and achievements of this program allows for continued reflection on how state and local agencies can come together to provide proper housing for individuals during a challenging time. As autonomous housing interventions increase, there is a growing need to consider the work and development that is required for the implementation and long-term sustainability of such programs.

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