



Why Bother Going to a Shelter?

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Among every issue concerning the American homeless, the availability of shelters is a common talking point. Unfortunately, offering the homeless a place to stay is not as easy as just creating temporary homes. Shelters and transitional housing aren't trusted, often scorned on a structural level that has ultimately left it as a band-aid solution for the homeless.

The majority of homeless are in states of panic and uncertainty that cloud their judgments on the strenuous process of entering a shelter. Some are chronically homeless and too mentally withdrawn to change their circumstances. The moment a person realizes that they have failed to remain financially stable for themselves or a larger family, it is hard to recover from the shock and shame.

Play along with this scenario. You've declared yourself bankrupt and called for homeless services or the CoC (Continuum of Care) to learn about available shelters or housing. Keep in mind that this process may take a very long time due to the frequency of calls. You do your research on these shelters, and you find several impasses. Having a disability, a pet, a severe mental illness, or a substance addiction means you need to narrow down your options, as several shelters or even your state will not have accommodations. Sometimes, having any of these will result in being denied outright.

Let's say you can manage those restrictions, now you need to play the lottery to get in. Because of the massively disproportionate number of homeless Americans compared to the few beds a shelter can provide, new shelters will become fully populated the moment they're announced and opened. Potential residents need to pack their belongings and wait in a queue for hours; they will likely be denied due to the high volume of residents. If one is lucky, they can stay for a few nights, but once that period is over, they'll need to repack and wait in the queue again.

Seceding to a shelter is already a gamble. Chances are, you've already developed some sort of community, either before homelessness or on the streets. Shelter means leaving behind close connections, family, and friends that were tenants under familiar rules in favor of an unknown, cramped colony with mandates and regulations you must research extensively to co-exist. Amongst juggling strict rules with workers too busy to

alleviate you with any compromises, you're also exposing yourself to people who you may not like or possibly dangerous. How can we expect people with loved ones and family to take these gambles, limited accommodations, and risks with these shelters?

Because the shelters act less as a social program and more as a set of rules dictating which accommodations to fund, there is an overwhelming sense of indifference in these shelters. There are too many complications. Too many criteria. Too many barriers. Too many limitations to services that just can't help everyone. Specific, individual problems can't get focus or lofty communication unless you're willing to wait hours or days to find someone to talk to. The expectation of "stay and get better" loses weight when the system doesn't provide all the resources to help the tenants live and engage with their environment comfortably. Frankly, the idea of a shelter being able to find qualified staff, medical, psychiatrists, security, background checkers, etc. is beyond what the system is capable of.

The simple fact is that American shelters have not adapted to the clients they're meant to hold. For those who are well-researched, mentally stable, able-bodied, and most importantly motivated to work, shelters can serve their intended function as transitional housing. Unfortunately, the homeless population encompasses a large variety of people that can't just get by with a few meals, fresh water, and a bed. Homelessness encompasses all ethnicities, addicts, runaways, abuse victims, veterans, criminals, past criminals, immigrants, etc. Anyone can become homeless from a couple of bad mistakes or even a series of disasters out of one's control. What much fewer people can achieve is the unrealistic standard of an average citizen. An independent person who can wade through rules and documents in the midst of impossible socio-economic pressures.

This isn't to say that transitional housing should be abolished and that no one likes them. There are some shelters that have adapted, such as targeting "long-term stayers," specifying their tenants, such as women or youth specific shelters, and offering recommendations for public-health programs that can assist with more complex issues. The shelters that can narrow down tenants with more shared experiences are often better at finding people who can find work together, defend each other from assault or theft, or form long-term friendships. But these are the result of innovations that build communities, not shelter-specific ones. The homeless need to be approached individually, not through policies but by people who can coordinately address their traumas as more than temporary setbacks. We are far from the perfect solution, but a shift in priorities can go a long way.

<https://quickhaven.com/solutions-to-homelessness/why-homeless-people-avoid-shelters#:~:text=Lack%20of%20Availability,like%20protection%20for%20the%20night.>

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