



# A Solution to Homelessness in Your Town:

## Valley View Senior Housing, Napa County, California

By Charles Durrett

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The number of homeless people is a crisis in this country that is growing rapidly. Architect Charles Durrett, a passionate advocate for the homeless, has developed several projects to house the homeless. His newest book, *A Solution to Homelessness in Your Town: Valley View Senior Housing, Napa County, California* explains how it can be done. The book describes the process for developing a specific community of affordable housing for low-income and homeless seniors. Creating a community, or a village, rather than just housing, is the most important aspect of his housing projects. His background in developing over 50 cohousing communities gives him a solid foundation for how to help create communities.

The book is written from his perspective as an architect and how his work and ideas helped create housing and gathering spaces for this particular community. But its lessons can be applied by anyone developing housing for the homeless.

Durrett details how he created an accessible village that works for seniors on a hilly site. The site is further complicated with abandoned retaining walls leftover from a previous developer. The cost of removing them would be prohibitive so he incorporates them into his design. Accessibility was also an important consideration—he came up with the clever solution of a “Lombard” sidewalk, one like the San Francisco street that winds up a hill. This sidewalk zigzags back and forth up the hill at an angle wheelchair users can negotiate as they visit their neighbors.

The book describes what sustainable materials were used to create a green project as well some of the sacrifices they made to keep the project within budget. Valley View Senior Housing is certified as GreenPoint Platinum, the highest rating in California. He points out that the volunteers who helped with the building show that “People helping each other is just as real as the government doing the heavy lifting.”

They built smaller homes at an average of 500 square feet in three styles so they could afford to build 70 homes. The houses can be smaller because households share common facilities, in-

cluding a common house. The community members have access to a computer lab, a craft room, laundry facilities, and a larger kitchen. A lounge encourages people to gather to enjoy each other’s company and provides a place to hold meetings.

Funding and constructing permanent housing can be time-consuming. But cheaper transitional housing can help get people off the streets into safe housing while developers create permanent housing. Durrett also talks about Opportunity Village in Eugene, Oregon where the tiny homes were built for only \$8000 each. The community is self-governing and demonstrates what can be done inexpensively while providing decent housing for the homeless.

In America we have not provided for our homeless. People end up homeless for many reasons, even if they have a job, because we have an economy built on low-paying jobs. It is everyone’s responsibility to help people have a home. The stories the homeless tell are heartbreaking—their roof leaked and they couldn’t afford to fix it, they got sick and now can’t afford a house, they lost their job so they couldn’t afford their rent and were evicted.

According to the Veterans Administration, 11 percent of our veterans are homeless. In a speech at the grand opening of Valley View Senior Housing, new resident Matt said, “You know that freeway you guys drove in on? I was under that freeway for more than six years and I’m a Vietnam veteran and now I have a home.”

The importance of giving the homeless a chance to rebuild their lives by housing them can’t be underestimated. But helping them form communities where they feel safe and emotionally supported is even more helpful to their recovery. *A Solution to Homelessness in Your Town* shows a path forward. 🐦

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*Kate Nichols was instrumental in developing Bellingham Cohousing. Recently, she moved to Port Townsend, Washington, where she is forming community with her neighbors and works in food bank gardens.*