

OPINION &gt; OPINION COLUMNISTS

## Dick Spotswood: Marin's 'Housing First' model needs an element of 'housing now'



Recreational vehicles are lined up as part of an emergency housing plan for farmworkers in Bolinas, California on Oct. 28, 2023. (Photo by Dick Spotswood)



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In a departure from the 'Housing First' model, steps are underway to provide emergency housing for farmworkers in Bolinas. An imaginative approach and speedy action on the part of the nonprofit Bolinas Community Land Trust resulted in a first-rate temporary solution that is already up and running.

Housing First is a concept designed to move those who are unhoused or poorly housed to permanent supportive housing. It's primarily designed for the homeless population suffering from the double diagnosis of psychiatric illness and substance abuse. That's where the "supportive" component comes in.

Supportive housing is the ultimate and proper goal for homeless people dealing with mental health issues and/or addiction. It's expensive, costing close to \$1 million per unit. Building supportive housing is slow, as is any housing in California. That reality leaves most of Housing First's targeted beneficiaries living in squalor on the streets or on fire-prone hillside camps.

Not all unhoused and poorly housed people require the full wraparound services associated with permanent supportive housing. Some simply have very low or no income. For multiple reasons, including bad life decisions or illnesses, they lack sufficient cash to rent a home in one of America's most expensive regions.

For the most part, the people living in old trailers and recreational vehicles along Novato's Binford Road fit into this category.

In Bolinas, the intended residents are hardworking Latino farmworkers and their families. For decades, they've lived in rudimentary cabins on the Tacherra Ranch on the Bolinas Mesa without proper water, sewage or electrical connections.

The Bolinas Community Land Trust saw the need. Wasting no time, it devised and implemented a solution. It's a model for how to expedite the process and provide temporary housing for those in need. Their idea is to lease and place 27 recreational vehicle trailers on a 20-acre parcel located at 130 Mesa Road.

The concept honors the sign at Bolinas' outskirts: "Entering a socially accomplished nature-loving town." Coincidentally, it's adjacent to another sign declaring, "Hometowns need homes."

Last weekend, I drove out to the Bolinas Mesa. To my amazement, the RVs are all in place. Each has a water and electricity connection. A mound septic system is planned. Frequent trash pickups leave the site pristine with none of the debris that makes Binford Road an eyesore.

Given the interminable delays that government projects often experience, it is startling to see a nonprofit essentially complete a project of this magnitude in a matter of months.

The estimated \$2.59 million needed to fund the temporary housing comes from the Marin Community Foundation, \$622,000 from the County of Marin and the balance from private donations. More contributions are sought. This temporary solution is a quarter the cost of permanent housing.

The trust leases the travel trailers. They are manufactured by Forest River of Elkhart, Indiana and are branded as "EVO Family RVs." J.D. Power indicates their average retail sales price is \$31,800. Used versions go for \$14,500.

The real expense is purchasing the land, preparing it for trailers and adding utility connections. There's space for an additional dozen RVs, which could house many of the 60 people living on the adjacent 160 Mesa Road parcel in ramshackle RVs.

Temporary housing should be part of Marin's basket of options for the unhoused. "Housing Now" is just as important a component as is the permanent Housing First model. Any time we see quick action at a reasonable cost that accomplishes a stated goal, we learn that what seemed impossible is doable.

If governments can't move as quickly as a land trust nonprofit organization, then turn the task of temporary housing over and relegate governments to the funding role.

*Columnist Dick Spotswood of Mill Valley writes on local issues Sundays and Wednesdays. Email him at [spotswood@comcast.net](mailto:spotswood@comcast.net).*

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