

**Our Blog**

# Words Matter: Housing vs. Shelter

*This post originally appeared as a Guest Commentary in the Santa Cruz Sentinel on February 18.*

Jessica York's [recent article](#) about Alekz Londos' new shelter structures shed light on the need for better protection from the elements for our unsheltered neighbors. It's heartening to see new solutions to improve someone's ability to sleep more securely. These new structures are similar to the Pallet shelters that Housing Matters installed at the onset of the pandemic to allow for plenty of healthy distance between shelter residents. They're efficient, durable, and very basic. But they aren't housing.

The article also discussed the recent steps taken by the Santa Cruz County Board of Supervisors on updating codes to allow more versatile tiny homes. As York states, tiny homes are stand-alone homes with basic functions, such as cooking, sleeping, and bathing facilities.

However, the article also indicates that these shelters and tiny homes are all part of the same spectrum. Indeed, this is something we hear regularly from community members: the idea that people just need shelter, and then their needs will be met.

While both tiny homes and shelter structures have their place in solving homelessness, it is important to recognize that they serve very different purposes. In the interest of cultivating a strong community understanding of – and support for – various solutions to homelessness, the two should not be conflated.

Shelter is a temporary place to sleep indoors. It is, for many, a stabilizing step along the path to permanent housing. Those living in shelters are still unhoused. Shelters typically do not provide all the functionality of a home; those living in standalone shelters do not have access to cooking facilities, restrooms within their living space, or plumbing.

Housing, on the other hand, is a permanent, more stable, autonomous living situation. A home – no matter how tiny or grand – has a place to prepare a meal, store food, bathe, and use the restroom. It is what anyone who is or has been housed is accustomed to: a fully functional, self-contained space where all basic needs can be met. It's a place that someone can stay without a pre-set exit date.

The distinction is important because shelter is never the end goal. Shelter is something we, at Housing Matters, offer people as a stepping stone to getting back into housing; shelter exists because we don't have sufficient systems to prevent homelessness. Shelter, in and of itself, does not end homelessness. Is it useful? Absolutely. Do we need more of it? Without a doubt. But is it the solution? No way.

What does end homelessness is housing. Homelessness is, by definition, being without a home. A person with a home is no longer homeless. Sure, it sounds simple and self-evident but all too often we hear ideas for solutions that don't actually include housing (and sometimes include some degree of "othering," talking about unhoused people as a monolith with singular experiences and issues).

If we had enough housing in our community, and the social services to prevent or very rapidly resolve homelessness for everyone in the first place, we would need very few shelter beds. People wouldn't need to sleep in congregate living environments, or in small, basic shelter structures. They would have a warm place to call home, with a door that locks, running water, and a place to prepare a meal. They would have walls to hang a piece of art or a photo on. Their children would have a table on which to craft their science project. They would have an address where they could receive mail, getting bills and letters and junk mail all in a timely fashion.

I would invite all community members to use care when they speak about shelter and housing. "Shelter solves sleeping. Housing solves homelessness," as Gov. Gavin Newsom has said in the past. Maintaining a careful distinction between the two terms ensures that we stay clear on the variety of solutions needed to address homelessness in our community. Let's increase shelter capacity to solve sleep today. And let's all work together toward increasing housing inventory to solve homelessness tomorrow.

*Written by Cassie Blom, Asst. Director of Communications*

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