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# As more go homeless, can Syracuse's builder of tiny homes play a bigger role in the solution?

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Eddie Piazza stands at the front gate of his 300-square-foot home on Bellevue Avenue in Syracuse. He is one of 26 tenants of A Tiny Home for Good, a nonprofit. Like Piazza, many of the tenants have found stability since being permanently housed. Dennis Nett | [dnett@syracuse.com](mailto:dnett@syracuse.com)

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By [Tim Knauss | tknauss@syracuse.com](mailto:tknauss@syracuse.com)

Syracuse, N.Y. — The skunk was an unwelcome surprise. Eddie Piazza, 69, who lives in a tiny house on Bellevue Avenue, tried to trap a groundhog that was eating from his vegetable garden. A skunk instead got caught in the humane trap.

So Piazza did what he and his fellow tiny home residents often do with a problem: He called Andrew Lunetta.

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Lunetta, 33, is the force behind A Tiny Home for Good, a small nonprofit that builds and rents little houses for people who otherwise would be homeless. Building houses is the easy part.

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Lunetta has a lot to deal with. After six years his organization owns 26 rental units – mostly tiny homes – and some of the tenants are among the most vulnerable and traumatized residents of the city.

“They’re difficult,” he said. “I’ll put it bluntly.”

One tenant got drunk and left a kitchen pot burning, more than once. Another stopped using the toilet and started going on the floor. Several frail tenants have been forced to share their homes with unwanted interlopers.

On top of that, A Tiny Home for Good still rests on shaky financial ground. At least half of its properties are tax delinquent, some so much so that the city could theoretically seize them for nonpayment.

Lunetta, who makes \$42,000 a year, said he can’t pay his small staff enough for the difficult work that they do. Tenants pay only \$300 a month, on average, and private donations make up the rest.

This is a pivotal time for A Tiny Home for Good, or THG for short.

Can Syracuse’s tiny home group get bigger?

The bootstrapped organization is widely admired but thinly financed. Most of the money raised over the years has gone into its properties, the value of which approaches \$1 million. To pay its staff adequately and build more homes, the group needs to find more robust streams of money.

If that quest succeeds, they believe they can make a significant contribution toward ending homelessness in Syracuse. They have a remarkable record with an approach that breaks the mold.

THG has undercut the shockingly high cost of most traditional low-income housing development. They have created permanent homes for people who are difficult to keep in place because of drug habits, mental illness or other problems.

Their approach might not fit every situation. The houses are unusually small and building them cheaply requires lots of volunteer labor. But it works.

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Dolphus Johnson stands in front of his home on Bellevue Avenue. Johnson has been a tenant of A Tiny Home for Good for six years and now works for the organization as a part-time janitor. Dennis Nett | [dnett@syracuse.com](mailto:dnett@syracuse.com)

National Grid has said it will subsidize four tiny homes later this year. A recent study by graduate students at Syracuse University's Maxwell School estimated that housing homeless Syracuse people in tiny homes saves \$118,000 per person annually by reducing hospital visits, jail time and other costs.

Lunetta said the organization is starting to go after government and foundation funding sources that the group has not tapped in the past. Those could provide more stable income and provide a pathway to growth.

But first, he had a skunk to deal with.

Finishing an interview, Lunetta excused himself to change out of his "one nice pair of clothes," a blue T-shirt and jeans. He put on an older T-shirt and jeans. Then he headed for Piazza's house to remove the skunk.

"There are people who do that," a reporter observed.

"Oh, I know," Lunetta said. "Everything we do, there's people who do that. But ... part of the reason we can keep it affordable is because we do a lot of it."

Besides, he said, tackling problems together is an important part of THG's ethos.

"I want to be there with Eddie as we figure this thing out together," he said.

It took about half an hour. They figured it out.

## Living in 300 square feet

The first two tiny homes – just 240 square feet each – were built in 2016 on Rose Avenue on the South Side. At that point, THG was just Lunetta and some volunteers.

Since then, he has gradually added staff. Now there are five full-timers, including his wife, Katie Weaver. She formerly worked at Hayner Hoyt and joined in December as director of development. She's in charge of finding more money.

The family-oriented staffing extends to tenants.



Eddie Piazza in his own home, a 300-square-foot house on Bellevue Avenue built by A Tiny Home for Good. The tenants tend to have rough backgrounds – prison, drugs, mental illness – but many have found stability since being housed. Dennis Nett | [dnett@syracuse.com](mailto:dnett@syracuse.com)

Dolphus Johnson, who became the first tenant after cycling in and out of shelters for years, now earns about \$1,000 a month as a part-time janitor for the group. Another longtime tenant, Dale Spicer, works part-time as the grounds manager. And the full-time site supervisor, James Sevigny, is a tenant.

At least one tenant, Eddie Piazza, is on the board of directors.

Piazza lives in the biggest cluster of tiny homes, six units arrayed in a row on the 200 block of Bellevue Avenue, just around the corner from the Price Rite on South Avenue.

His place consists of one main room plus a bathroom. The bed is a few feet from the kitchen counter and mini fridge. There's no closet. His clothes hang in the entry near the front door. In all, the house covers 300 square feet.

"It could be a bit bigger," Piazza said. He was not complaining.

He gets choked up thinking about the day almost four years ago when he lucked into this home. Piazza, who has Parkinson's disease, was 65 when he got paroled in late 2018 after more than 28 years in state prison. He had \$1,000 a month to live on, and no idea how he could afford rent.

Lunetta offered him a brand-new tiny house for \$300 a month.

"Andrew is an angel," Piazza whispered.

## **From heroin to home**

The homes are tiny not only to keep costs low, but to discourage hoarding and to make them easier to keep clean, Lunetta said.

The first homes were a little too small. Based on feedback from the tenants, the standard size now is 360 square feet – enough to build a small bedroom separate from the living area.



Jeanette Kilmartin and her 13-year-old pit bull, Emmi, relax in the bedroom of Kilmartin's house on West Matson Avenue in Syracuse. Kilmartin, a former heroin addict, now works at the YMCA and said she has thrived since moving in three years ago. Dennis Nett | [dnett@syracuse.com](mailto:dnett@syracuse.com)

The size of the vacant lots given to THG, and the local zoning, sometimes determines what THG builds. On some lots, the tiny homes are built attached, or townhome style. On others they are freestanding. Sometimes, they aren't even tiny. The largest, a 1,000-square-foot house, is occupied by a mother and her young children.

Jeanette Kilmartin lives with her adult daughter in a house designed for two.

Kilmartin, 57, was a heroin addict. She said she started taking pain pills after two motorcycle accidents and turned to heroin after the prescriptions ran out. By the time she kicked the habit, six years ago, she had no house or job to return to.

Like many recovering addicts, Kilmartin lived for a time in supportive housing operated by her treatment center, Helio Health. But there's a time limit on that. Eventually, you have to move out.



Andrew Lunetta, founder and executive director of A Tiny Home for Good, takes a break from renovating a single-family house on Rowland Street in the Skunk City neighborhood. The group plans to flip the house to make money for its mission to build houses for homeless Syracuse residents. Dennis Nett | [dnett@syracuse.com](mailto:dnett@syracuse.com)

Based on her limited income, Kilmartin imagined she would end up in “a rooming house, with pedophiles, and being the only female.”

Instead, Lunetta placed her in a new house. At 750 square feet, the home on West Matson Avenue is different from what THG usually builds. It has two bedrooms and two bathrooms, with a kitchen/living space in between.

Ordinarily, the group builds single-occupancy houses to avoid roommate clashes. Indeed, Kilmartin had problems with two previous roommates. Now her adult daughter occupies the second bedroom.

Kilmartin said Lunetta is like family. She has met his mother and grandmother. Lunetta and other staff are eager to help any way they can, she said. They’ll provide rides to medical appointments, for example, or help fill out paperwork.



Sometimes, the help is more urgent. One night in October 2019, a THG resident named Steve Parker had a stroke that would put him in the hospital for close to a year. He called Lunetta, who could barely make out what Parker said but rushed to help. THG kept Parker's house open for his return. He now gets daily help from a personal care aide.



Steve Parker (left) and his personal care aide, Aretha Paul, at Parker's home built by A Tiny Home for Good. When Parker had a stroke and could barely speak, he phoned Andrew Lunetta, the group's executive director, for help. Dennis Nett | [dnett@syracuse.com](mailto:dnett@syracuse.com)

The relationships between A Tiny Home for Good staff and tenants are the key to long-term stability, Kilmartin said.

“It’s not even just having a place to live, but being able to thrive in that environment,” she said.

## **A low-cost approach**

In terms of cost, A Tiny Home for Good operates on a different plane than other affordable housing developers.

Kilmartin’s two-bedroom house cost \$82,000 to build in 2019, counting materials and the cost of subcontractors who did some of the construction, Lunetta said. If the work was done entirely by paid laborers, the house might have cost as much as \$120,000,

he said.

Piazza's one-person house on Bellevue, completed in 2018, cost \$50,000, he said.

That's a far cry from what low-income housing usually costs. Most major affordable housing developers rely on low-income housing tax credits and other government financing, the rules for which are complex and costly to comply with.



Eddie Piazza (top left, with rake) works with Andrew Lunetta, executive director of A Tiny Home for Good, to remove a skunk from a humane trap at Piazza's house in Syracuse. Tim Knauss | tknauss@syracuse.com

For example: Just up the road from Kilmartin is the [Gardens at St. Anthony Apartments](#), a complex of 54 low-income apartments built at a converted Catholic school and convent on West Colvin Street. Completed earlier this year, the project cost \$20 million, or more than \$370,000 for each one-bedroom apartment.

That is a typical price these days, said Michael Collins, Syracuse commissioner of neighborhood and business development.

## **Part of the community**

Lunetta started volunteering at the former Oxford Inn homeless shelter in 2008, while he was a student at Le Moyne College, and joined the paid staff in 2010. He worked at “The Ox” and its successor, the Clinton Street men’s shelter until 2016.



Not every house built by A Tiny Home for Good is tiny. This two-bedroom, two-bathroom house in Syracuse has about 750 square feet. Dennis Nett | dnett@syracuse.com

During that time he conceived [A Tiny Home for Good](#).

Tiny homes, he reasoned, could provide a stable alternative to trash-infested, misery-soaked apartment buildings like the [Skyline Apartments](#) that often await people moving out of shelters, mental health facilities or drug treatment programs. Lunetta had seen too many people cycle in and out of those places.

He marshaled enough private donors and volunteer laborers to erect [two tiny homes](#) in July 2016. Three more were built later that year. All told, the group has built 18 houses so far and renovated three duplexes, yielding a total of 26 units.

The work is widely admired by housing advocates and others. [Onondaga County](#) and Access CNY, a nonprofit service agency, have provided grants in the past. National Grid just donated \$250,000 to build four state-of-the-art, energy-efficient tiny homes on Rich Street designed by architecture students at the University of Buffalo. Construction will begin as soon as the city issues permits.

“We can’t say enough good things about them,” said Jared Paventi, speaking for National Grid.

The use of tiny homes to shelter the homeless has bubbled up in many U.S. cities. Yet surprisingly few examples mirror what happens in Syracuse.

In many cases, organizations use tiny homes as temporary housing for people who are trying to make the transition from shelter to permanent home. In Los Angeles, for example, six [tiny home complexes](#) provide transitional housing for roughly 1,000 residents, two per 64-square-foot house.

In other cases, tiny homes are clustered into “villages” that create an entire new community. The homes may be permanent, but they are separate from the wider community. The biggest example is [Community First](#), a planned community eight miles from downtown Austin, Texas, with room for 500 RVs and tiny homes on 51 acres.



This row of 300-square-foot homes on Bellevue Avenue in Syracuse was built in 2018 by A Tiny Home for Good, a nonprofit. Some of the tenants have rough backgrounds – prison, drugs, mental illness – but many have found stability since being housed. Dennis Nett | [dnett@syracuse.com](mailto:dnett@syracuse.com)

In Syracuse, the tiny homes are sometimes clustered in small groups of two or three, or in one case six, to make efficient use of building lots or to comply with zoning, Lunetta said. But the idea is to scatter them throughout the city, to remain integrated into neighborhoods.

“I think what makes Tiny Homes’ model so unique is that it is scattered-site. It’s not concentrating poverty in one area of the city,” said Megan Stuart, director of the Housing and Homeless Coalition of Central New York.

The need is vast, Stuart said. Homelessness has surged in 2022. An annual census in January found 712 homeless individuals in Onondaga, Cayuga and Oswego counties, up from 469 in 2021 and 618 in 2020. Some 400 homeless households are on a waiting list for housing, she said.

THG fills an important niche.

"They really are serving a lot of the most vulnerable people in the community," Stuart said.

## The answer was no

Lunetta believes they could do more. To make way for that growth, he will have to learn to delegate more of the hands-on work and focus on management, he said. And Weaver will have to convince funding agencies such as the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development that their work is worth backing.



Jeanette Kilmartin stands in a doorway at her two-bedroom house, which she shares with her adult daughter. "This isn't tiny houses," she said. "This is tiny homes." Dennis Nett | [dnett@syracuse.com](mailto:dnett@syracuse.com)

Navigating the housing bureaucracy can be a challenge.

Lunetta met recently with Syracuse's assessment commissioner, Matthew Oja, to ask whether THG could benefit from a tax break that larger affordable home developers get. Under "shelter rent agreements" granted by the city, state-subsidized developers pay a small percentage of their net rents in lieu of city and county property taxes, saving thousands of dollars.

The answer was no. Under state law, companies that are eligible for shelter rent deals must incorporate according to specific rules. One of the rules is: "The term 'housing development fund corporation' or 'housing development fund company' shall be included as a part of the corporate name."

Complying with the state law takes staff resources and involves a higher level of regulatory compliance than THG is used to, Oja said.

"We love what they do," he added. "We'd love to help him in any way we can. But he does sort of operate in an area where our market and the law just don't provide a lot for him."

Lunetta said he has asked a lawyer to look at whether THG can get some property tax relief.

Collins, the Syracuse neighborhoods commissioner, said he expects A Tiny Home for Good to find a way to grow.

"You know, what we've seen from them is, they're smart and they're creative," he said. "So if that's their goal, I wouldn't bet against them."

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