

Homeless people get organized—and radical

In Tacoma, Minneapolis, and elsewhere, people without housing have taken over buildings.

by [Caitlin Yoshiko Kandil](#) in the [June 3, 2021](#) issue



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Less than a week before Thanksgiving, a time of year when nighttime temperatures can dip to 40 or even 30 degrees, housing activists and homeless residents of Tacoma, Washington, took over a long-abandoned middle school building with the aim of turning it into emergency pandemic housing for the most vulnerable members of the community.

The group, called Tacoma Housing Now, brought along electricians and construction workers to do repairs on the building and make it inhabitable, along with a licensed physician and mental health counselor to provide care for the new occupants.

Two unhoused people had died of exposure in the previous week, activists said, including a 68-year-old man in a wheelchair. With the city's homeless shelters full and warming centers closed on many nights, being indoors as winter set in was a matter of life or death, they argued, and amid the deadly third wave of the COVID-19

pandemic, when hospitalizations and deaths skyrocketed, an issue of public health.

After taking the building, which had sat empty for more than a decade, they renamed it “Home.” They also issued a list of demands, the most important of which was calling on the city to put the building and other vacant public properties into a community-controlled land trust—an entity that can hold the property and rent it to low-income residents at below-market rates—as a way to house Tacoma’s homeless population.

“The pandemic and resulting recession has completely shifted my view of how much this [current] system can help us,” said Rebecca Parson, a spokeswoman for Tacoma Housing Now. “It’s showed people like me and others that we don’t have a bottom in this country. One of the last waves of radical housing activism was about 100 years ago with the Great Depression. Now we’re finding ourselves in very similar conditions. We’re coming together and providing for ourselves when the system refuses to provide for us.”

Tacoma Housing Now is part of a nationwide wave of people occupying vacant houses, schools, and hotels as a way to provide shelter amid the pandemic—and to shine a light on the moral question of what it means to let buildings sit uninhabited while homeless populations swell. Emerging alongside these direct actions, activists say, is a broader recognition that housing is a human right, not something that should be available only to those who can afford it.

“The message that’s so powerful is poor people, homeless people, and allies doing for themselves,” said Paul Boden, executive director of the Western Regional Advocacy Project, a San Francisco homeless advocacy group. “It’s ‘I’m not getting in another line, I’m not doing another intake. The public housing administration has empty units—we’re grabbing that. This for-profit company has hundreds of empty units where they’ve evicted people from those units—we’re taking one of them.’ Poor people are saying, ‘We’re not playing anymore. We’re just going to take this.’ And I think it’s awesome.”

In many cities, the number of vacant homes exceeds the number of homeless people.

Many of the unhoused Tacoma residents who occupied the school building had been living in an encampment under Highway 509, which connects Tacoma to Seattle, about 35 miles north. Of the 40 or 50 who live in the encampment, about half are

people of color, Parson said. Most have serious medical issues, including cancer, diabetes, and heart disease. Some nights get so cold, she said, that several people will huddle together in a single tent for warmth. During the pandemic, however, this has put them at increased risk of infection. The camp is located on the same plot of land once occupied by the city's Hooverville, a Depression-era shantytown—a poignant sign of how little progress has been made in the almost 100 years since, Parson said.

Much of today's homelessness crisis can be traced to policies implemented decades after the hundreds of Hoovervilles arose across the United States, said Peter Dreier, professor of politics and urban and environmental policy at Occidental College in Los Angeles. These include the deinstitutionalization of people with mental illness, which led to the closure of mental hospitals without adequate funding to replace their services; low wages; and the slashing of federal subsidies for low-income housing. "We've never gotten close to where we were in the 1970s in terms of subsidized housing," he said, noting that unlike other federal programs such as food stamps, which anyone can get if they're eligible, housing vouchers are determined by lottery. "Before the pandemic hit, there were about 15 to 18 million families that were eligible for housing subsidies, but less than a quarter got them. In most cities, if you go to the local housing agency and sign up to get a housing voucher, you'll wait two, three, four, five, six years or more."

At the same time, cities have allowed private developers to build luxury apartments for market-rate renters, Dreier said, which has driven up the cost of housing and led to a growing number of vacant rental units. The National Low Income Housing Coalition found in 2019 that in order to afford the average two-bedroom market-rate unit at \$1,194 per month, a minimum-wage worker would have to work 127 hours per week. "In no state, metropolitan area, or county in the U.S. can a worker earning the federal or prevailing state or local minimum wage afford a modest two-bedroom rental home at fair market rent by working a standard 40-hour work week," the group's *Out of Reach* report said.

Yet the number of vacant houses and apartments exceeds the number of unhoused people in many cities, including New York, San Francisco, and Los Angeles. According to a 2020 report by the Alliance of Californians for Community Empowerment Institute, Los Angeles has more than 36,000 unhoused residents—and more than 93,000 vacant units, half of which have been withheld from the housing market because they are second homes or investment properties.

“There’s a bad contradiction between the fact that there’s a lot of homeless people and a lot of vacant apartments,” said Dreier. “It demonstrates how we have our priorities out of whack.”

This contradiction has also given rise to the housing movement found in Tacoma and elsewhere. “You’ve got empty buildings and you’ve got people with nowhere to live,” said WRAP’s Boden. “What could be more logical?”

Organizers of these direct actions often trace their origins to a group of Black, unhoused mothers in Oakland, California, called Moms 4 Housing. In November 2019, the women and their children moved into a long-vacant house owned by the corporate speculator Wedgewood LLC, declaring housing a human right and drawing attention to the 4,000 vacant units in the city—approximately the same as the number of unhoused people. They cleaned the house, installed a water heater, set up bunk beds for the children, and paid the utility bills. After challenging an eviction notice in court, in January 2020 the women were removed from the house and arrested by police officers who arrived in riot gear and armored vehicles.

But the women’s activism—and law enforcement’s militarized response—drew attention and support to their demands. Days later, Wedgewood agreed to sell the house to Moms 4 Housing through the Oakland Community Land Trust. In October, after finalizing the deal, the group announced the property would become transitional housing for other unhoused mothers.

The action sparked local and state reforms, including a new California law limiting corporations’ ability to scoop up multiple properties at foreclosure auctions, and several activists from Moms 4 Housing won seats in local government. Moms 4 Housing also inspired other organizers outside Oakland, including a group in Los Angeles that, citing the “right to shelter in place,” occupied vacant homes owned by the California Department of Transportation as part of a now-defunct plan to extend a highway—and successfully negotiated the transfer of more than two dozen of the properties to the Los Angeles Housing Authority for use as transitional housing during the pandemic. “It really pushed forward the understanding that housing is a human right, and what that means is that housing is not a business or private property first,” said Leah Simon-Weisberg, an attorney for Moms 4 Housing.

In Tacoma, police kicked activists and unhoused residents out of the middle school building the same day they occupied it. Tacoma Housing Now then organized

another action to draw attention to the city's refusal to offer trash pickup at homeless encampments. Members of the group drove a U-Haul to one of the camps, loaded the trash into the truck, and dumped it on the steps of City Hall. "City Council won't do their job, so we're doing it for them. It's trash day in Tacoma!" the group wrote in a press release. "Trash delivery will continue until service improves."

In December, Tacoma Housing Now wanted to get as many people as it could off the streets for Christmas. This time, the group targeted a Travelodge motel, paying for 43 people to spend the night on Christmas Eve. The next day, activists met with the owner of the Travelodge and said they would be staying at the motel—but not paying. Instead, they explained, they'd work with the city to use money from the Federal Emergency Management Agency and the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act—which partially reimburses local governments to put unhoused people in hotels—to pay for the rooms. The occupation lasted six nights before they were kicked out by police.

Parson said one of the biggest influences on Tacoma Housing Now has been another group called Philadelphia Housing Action. Philadelphia's housing authority has long been sitting on hundreds of vacant properties that it acquired through eminent domain over the years, said Jennifer Bennetch, an organizer with the group. So she started making a list of them. The information would be good to have for talking points, or to file a lawsuit against the city someday, she thought.

But once the pandemic hit and shelters started slashing their capacity in order to maintain proper social distancing protocol, Bennetch saw an opportunity. "People were reaching out and saying, 'The shelter closed and I have nowhere to take my kids, what should I do?'" she said. "I had a list of 500 vacant public housing units that had boards on them."

So Philadelphia Housing Action started helping unhoused families move into the empty homes, successfully sheltering more than 50 people between March and September. "We have tons of boarded-up homes that are already designated as low-income housing, so why not?" she said. The city's housing authority attempted to evict families, but Bennetch said she was able to fight back, citing squatter's rights. Being housed has had a big impact on the families. She said some mothers had lost custody of their children but were reunited with them once they had an address and their home passed inspection.

In addition to the occupation of vacant homes, Philadelphia Housing Action also organized a large protest encampment to push back against the city's regular evictions of homeless camps, even during the pandemic. (The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommends "allow[ing] people who are living unsheltered or in encampments to remain where they are.") Organizing the encampment as a protest, Bennetch said, gave unhoused activists First Amendment protections against police sweeps.

"It changes the way people look at housing," she said of the actions. "It shows people that housing is so commodified, but at the same time there are thousands of boarded-up homes everywhere. It was really important for me to show how crazy it is when you think about it. People can't afford to live, but then there are ten boarded-up homes on one block, and they're owned by the government. There are a lot of people that probably normally would not support this, but I think people right now realize how close they are to being here, and people are not in the same place with their comfort anymore. I think the pandemic does play a role in people understanding that they could be here any day."

In September, Philadelphia Housing Action and the city reached a tentative agreement to transfer 50 vacant city-owned homes into a community land trust, which will permanently designate the properties for use as extremely low-income housing. "We have a big duty to succeed with this because it's not just us," Bennetch said. "If we do good with this, then other groups will be asking for it in their neighborhood."

Other direct actions in the United States have been aimed at private property. In Minneapolis, a diverse coalition came together in the aftermath of the police killing of George Floyd in May 2020 to move unhoused residents into a Sheraton hotel. Zach Johnson, executive director of the Catholic social justice group Call to Action and one of the organizers of a project some called "Sanctuary Hotel" or "Share-a-Ton," said the shelter system only has capacity for about half of the city's homeless population, which leaves about 1,000 people sleeping on the streets each night, often in large encampments that are routinely broken up by law enforcement.

Once the pandemic hit, local government transferred the homeless population in shelters to hotels—but left out those who had been living on the streets. The uprising after Floyd was killed was focused on an area near one encampment. When the National Guard arrived, Johnson said, organizers felt a new sense of urgency to

get unsheltered people off the streets—to protect them from police violence.

Johnson was part of a group of a dozen lead organizers who approached the owner of the Sheraton about paying for 20 hotel rooms for unhoused people to stay in. If the owner didn't agree, the group was ready to occupy the hotel. With the police preoccupied with protests against the Floyd killing, Johnson said, "our gamble was that they were not going to come to clear a bunch of homeless people out of a hotel lobby for a night."

The owner initially agreed, but the plan quickly snowballed, and by the first day, 100 people had moved into the hotel. Three days later there were 400, with another 500 on a waiting list.

No single person or group was formally in charge; instead hundreds donated or volunteered to care for the homeless occupants of the hotel. Some dropped off food, clothes, cleaning supplies, and tools, transforming the basement level of the hotel into a warehouse of supplies. Others created teams to tend to various tasks at the hotel: organizing and distributing the donations, cooking three meals a day, cleaning and sanitizing, wellness checks, housekeeping, laundry, trash pickup, maintenance, front desk check-in, security. A medical team also oversaw a safe injection site.

While the project started off with a wide base of support, that gradually started to wane. "People from the governor's office, city council, and county commissioners were like, 'Yes, this is a good thing, the community is stepping up, and we want to support them,'" Johnson said. "There were foundations lining up to offer support. And then they just backed out. They never did anything, and that's when it all kind of fell apart. That institutional support didn't show up. The needs just kept growing, and we were doing it all on a volunteer basis. I don't know what came first, the institutional support backed out so things started to get out of control, or 1,000 people were walking through this hotel everyday and the institutional support was like, 'No, we can't deal with that.'"

Johnson said they couldn't keep pace with the rapidly growing need, and eventually the hotel became unsafe. Less than two weeks after the hotel was first taken, the owner called the police to have the occupants evicted. Some left. After about a month, everyone was gone.

After the Sanctuary Hotel disbanded, the city temporarily legalized an encampment in a public park. "The discussions about what is actually a public space—no doubt

that conversation came directly out of this project,” Johnson said. Meanwhile, some organizers started raising money to start another hotel shelter outside the city.

But Johnson said that one of the key lessons was how to keep the focus on the government, even when private property is taken. “It’s about keeping the pressure on the people whose responsibility it should be from the very outset,” he said. “This is public responsibility. That’s what the government is there for, and they will do everything in their power to not take responsibility for things that aren’t already on their plate, which in this case is unsheltered homeless. There are some employees here and there who try their best to be present in camps, but two or three outreach workers is just not going to get it done.”

In Tacoma, while the city has yet to agree to transfer vacant properties to a community land trust—one of Tacoma Housing Now’s key demands—the group’s actions have led the city to add 200 shelter beds and to keep the warming shelter open 24 hours a day, seven days a week, and for additional months of the year. “We’re fighting for long-term solutions and permanent solutions and a community land trust, but it is nice to have these other wins along the way,” Parson said. (Neither the city of Tacoma nor the city of Minneapolis responded to requests to comment on housing activism.)

Parson said Tacoma Housing Now has been connecting with other housing activists across the country to share ideas, coordinate, and lend support. She sees the movement growing. “These occupations will keep increasing, because the need will keep increasing,” she said.

Boden, of WRAP, agreed. The pandemic has revealed how prevalent homelessness is, he said, since shelters are now operating at half capacity to maintain social distancing guidelines, forcing many more people onto the streets. And because the economic downturn impacts everyone, the myth that homelessness is a choice or simply the result of bad behavior has been dispelled, he said. It’s also shown there’s no time to be patient and wait for one’s turn in line for housing.

“If you really want it, you’re going to have to grab it and just take it,” Boden said. “And that’s what they’re doing. And I hope to God it spreads like wildfire.”

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title “Moving in.”