

What do homeless people need? Homes.

By [Steve Thorngate](#)

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In discussions of poverty's ills and cures, it doesn't take long for the subject of root causes to come up. Not everyone agrees what those root causes are, of course—or whose fault they are. But it's often taken for granted that you can't just tackle a presenting problem directly; you have to go for the root, whatever it is.

This certainly isn't always wrong, but it does have a way of obscuring simple, obvious solutions. People don't have enough money for basic expenses? Jobs are a huge part of the answer, of course, and subsidies for food, energy bills, and other essentials help a ton. But there's also a strong case for [just giving people money](#)—if only it wasn't so objectionable to our root-cause, spend-smart mindset. Money, after all, is the most straightforward answer to the question, “What do poor people need?”

Homeless people need homes. It's often not the only thing they need, but it's the most urgent one. By now there is more than 20 years of research that supports “housing first,” a model in which the homeless are first given a place to live and then offered additional services, but not as a condition for staying there. The Bush administration shifted the federal government's efforts toward a housing first approach, an initiative furthered under Obama; numerous American cities have moved in the same direction.

But [much of the action in anti-homelessness funding comes at the state level](#), where it can be harder to get traction for a policy that, while it saves money in the long term, does so by spending a heap of it right now—on poor people.

Then there's Utah, a conservative state that's on track to end homelessness by 2015. [Scott Carrier's whole article](#) on Utah's success is worth reading. I'll highlight just the religion angle:

Two men who'd worked with the homeless in Utah for many years—Matt Minkevitch, executive director of the largest shelter in Salt Lake City, and

Kerry Bate, executive director of the Housing Authority of the County of Salt Lake—started scheming.

"We got together and decided we needed Lloyd Pendleton," Minkevitch said.

Pendleton was then an executive manager for the LDS Church Welfare Department, and he had a reputation for solving difficult managerial problems both in the United States and overseas. He'd also been involved in helping out with homeless projects in Salt Lake City, organizing volunteers, and donating food from the Bishop's Storehouse. Dedicated to providing emergency and disaster assistance around the world as well as supplying basic material necessities to church members in need of assistance, the Church Welfare Department is like a large corporation in itself. It has 52 farms, 13 food-processing plants, and 135 storehouses. It also makes furniture like mattresses, tables, and dressers. If you're a member of the church and you lose your job, your house, and all your money, you can go to your bishop and he'll give you a place to live, some food, some money, and set you up with a job...no questions asked. All you have to do in return is some community service and try to follow the teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith. A system very much like Housing First—give them what they need, then work on their problems.

Minkevitch and Bate did get Pendleton involved: the LDS elders loaned him to the State to head up a task force. The strategy worked. "It's church leadership"—not just church money—"that's immensely important," Bate tells Carrier. "If the word gets out that the church is behind something, it removes a lot of barriers."

Utah is, of course, something of a religious special case. The LDS Church is tightly knit, like most relatively small religious traditions in the U.S.—but in Utah, it's more like relatively enormous. In most states it's not even clear who the equivalent of Pendleton would be, much less that putting them in charge would actually defuse opposition among their constituents.

And there would be plenty of opposition, of course. Christians do a lot to help the homeless. But Christians are, to put it mildly, hardly immune to the sort of neoliberal, you-don't-deserve-anything attitude that housing first challenges so deeply.

Still, it's encouraging to see this approach's positive growth and positive results, much of it spearheaded by political conservatives. Homeless people need homes, and governments have the unique ability to provide them at scale. But they'll need people's support—Christians' support—to do it.