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INDEPENDENT RESEARCH SHOWS SUNFLOWER HOUSES SUCCESS, ENCOURAGE TOMPKINS COUNTY TO INCREASE FUNDING

BY LORIEN TYNE

(Photo: provided/Ithaca Times File



After undertaking an assessment study to study the Sunflower Houses success, researchers are urging the Tompkins County Legislature to provide increased funding to the program that since 2021 has provided low-barrier housing and wraparound services for formerly incarcerated men.

The assessment findings, which were intended to provide proof of concept for the project's innovative housing model, were presented at the Tompkins County Housing and Economic Development Committee on July 16.

The Sunflower Houses is a collaborative effort with Opportunities, Alternatives, and Resources (OAR) operating the program, Ultimate Reentry Opportunity (URO) supporting the assessment, and Ithaca Neighborhood Housing Services (INHS) subsidizing the units to OAR at a below-market rate.

Qualitative data was collected from 2021-24 by independent researchers Paula Ioanide and Charley Willison. After the pilot period ended, the pair gathered qualitative data from current and former residents.

The program centers three evidence-based strategies to address homelessness and justice system involvement: supportive housing, a Housing First model, and decriminalizing homeless-ness. Supportive housing includes both housing and wraparound services. Ioanide said wraparound services means that OAR works with each individual to assess what support they need in obtaining permanent housing, economic stability and sustainable employment.

A Housing First approach includes social and medical services to maintain housing stability in addition to barrier-free housing,

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meaning that residency is not conditional based on sobriety, behavior or other mandates seen in some housing facilities. Decriminalizing homelessness entails limiting un-necessary police interaction.

"A lot of the folks we're talking about have zero income," Ioanide said. "They're returning from state prison or from the local jails or they have a history of houselessness, chronic houselessness in particular, in part because of that criminal history that then provides barriers to them accessing other forms of housing. So you can think of it both as an intervention in reducing houselessness and in assisting people with past criminal records."

The presentation highlighted that Tompkins County has seen almost a 300% increase in homeless individuals since 2010.

Assessment Findings

The in-program re-booking recidivism rate was about 7%, meaning that three of 42 residents living in the program between 2021-23 went through formal processing after being arrested at least once while being a client. Of 56 people in-program from 2021-23 went through formal pro-cessing after being arrested at least once while being a client. Of 56 people in-program from 2021-24, 81% entered as homeless individuals and 68% of those who left the program obtained housing. More than 50% of people work while living in the Sunflower Houses, and Ioanide said they found that the leading obstacle to finding and maintaining employment are diagnosed or undiagnosed health issues, like chronic health conditions, past or current substance use conditions and co-occurring mental illness.

"That was an important lesson learned because it told us we really have to provide more medical support in partnership with entities like REACH and our local medical system here," Ioanide said. "So, [OAR] partners with them to walk them through that labyrinth of bureaucracy that it requires to obtain those services."

Funding

The Sunflower Houses program annually costs about $170,000 to operate and is funded through several sources. The cost per resident is $10 per day. The program's 2025 budget is 26% county funding, 30% state funding, 32% Opioid Settlement Funding and 12% rent and private donations.

The county allocated money to the Sunflower Houses for a three-year pilot program: $27,680 in 2022, $69,472 in 2023 and another $69,472 in 2024. In the fall of 2024, the county asked all departments and funded nonprofits to cut its requested funding by 5%, at which time OAF requested a follow-up one-time payment of $77,680. Former county admi-nistrator Lisa Holmes recom-mended that the county not grant any money to the Sunflower Houses, but Legislator Travis Brooks suggested allocating the program $45,000 annually through 2027, which was passed unanimously by the legislature on Oct. 3, 2024. The 2025 budget also included $35,000 for the program assessment research to URO.

OAR Director Dave Sanders told the Ithaca Times that if New York state's Opioid Settlement Funding initiative had not become available when it did, the program would not have survived after its pilot years.

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"I would say, as a nonprofit, I'm going year-to-year," Sanders said. "New grants will pop up. I'm quite certain of it."

At the July 16, 2025 committee meeting, Ioanide said that as independent assessors of the program, she and Willison recommend that the county fund the program permanently like it does for OAR.

"You're talking about a current structure where Dave is very creatively scrapping something together and still producing really amazing outcomes versus what he could do if he actually had stable funding at [$170,000 like OAF does], which would be these much more robust services," Ioanide said.

Brooks asked how the program can be sustainable without having to rely on county money, given that the Sunflower Houses was unable to receive stable funding from the Department of Social Services because of sanctions and restrictions the program does not meet.

Willison said individual residents are able to get some funding through Medicaid's 1115 waiver, which began in 2023 and allows organizations to bill medicaid for non-medical services. Despite the federal administration's $1 trillion budget cut to Medicaid, Willison said it will continue through the next decade because the money has already been allocated to New York state.

"It does still exist," Willison said. "The guidance has been taken down, but the waivers are being approved on an ongoing basis."