

Jacksonville housing-and-services model stabilizes chronically homeless

By [Beth Reese Cravey](#)

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Providing housing and individualized services for 68 chronically homeless people in Jacksonville reduced by 30 percent the overall crisis-services expenses that would have been spent on them otherwise, according to study results from a four-year pilot project.

The project, called the Solution That Saves, compared the cost of such “high utilizers” of emergency rooms, jails and overnight shelters for two years prior to them receiving housing and two years afterward. The results showed \$7.5 million in pre-housing costs, \$5.3 million in post-housing costs, according to Ability Housing, the Jacksonville-based nonprofit that ran the pilot project.

“The Solution That Saves is the first project to provide Florida-specific data on the impact of this approach,” said Shannon Nazworth, president and CEO of Ability Housing, which serves Northeast and Central Florida. “The evidence shows us that housing is health care. Housing linked with individualized supports can help end homelessness in our community, reduce utilization of crisis services and, most importantly, contribute to a higher quality of life for our neighbors in need and our community as a whole. But it’s not just about saving money, it’s about saving lives.”

But there are roadblocks to applying the housing-and-services concept to all 450 or so of Jacksonville’s chronically homeless. First, it would use up the city’s entire inventory of affordable housing and, second, the state, local and federal governments are not allocating much money to build more, she said.

“We have an affordable housing shortage in this country. We have an affordable housing crisis,” Nazworth said.

The Florida Housing Finance Corp., Disability Rights Florida, Florida Blue Foundation and U.S. Department of Housing and Development funded the Jacksonville pilot project and two others still under way in Miami-Dade and Pinellas counties. Earlier studies by other states reported cost savings from the housing-and-services model, and Florida officials wanted a “cost-benefit evaluation of the concept to see whether that was really true,” said Nancy Muller, director of policy and special programs for the Housing Finance Corp.

The local participants ranged in age from 20 to 64 and most had at least one disability. They were placed in scattered housing across the city and at Village on Wiley, a multifamily development owned by Ability Housing.

The largest savings in the Jacksonville pilot project were in health care expenses, including a 58 percent drop in hospital costs, 59 percent drop in inpatient services and 43 percent drop in emergency room costs.

Ability Housing: The Solution that Saves

For more information go to abilityhousing.org.

“Why does a hospital care about housing?” said Mike Griffin, vice president of public policy and advocacy for Adventist Health System and an Ability Housing board member. “Someone who lives in a house is probably going to be healthier than someone who lives in the woods.”

The data must be followed by action and then results, said Darnell Smith, market president of Florida Blue.

“Solutions come through partnerships,” he said. “It’s appropriate to put together solutions that absolutely work.”

The study also showed a 65 percent decrease in costs associated with arrests and jail bookings through the Jacksonville Sheriff’s Office, as well as a 72 percent decrease in jail costs. In addition, 77 percent of the participants reported improvement in at least one aspect of life, such as perceived physical and psychological health.

“Life was much better,” Nazworth said. “They’re at home, they’re getting health care, they’re getting jobs.”

The individualized support, such as enrollment in Medicaid and Medicare, primary care and specialty health care and transportation and employment services, were key, Muller said.

“You can’t just do the housing. You’ve got to do the services,” she said.

Although the Miami-Dade and Pinellas results have not yet been released, she said likely “we’re going to be able to tell policy makers that this is truly the solution that saves.”

Jacksonville City Council President Aaron Bowman said he wasn’t surprised by the study results. He said affordable housing and homelessness are already on the minds of some council members and have been brought up in talks about the upcoming city budget.

“It’s good to see the data that supports the idea,” he said.

The next step for Ability Housing and its partners in health care, homelessness prevention and other fields will be educating other elected officials and their staffs about the study results, Nazworth said. State lawmakers in particular will be asked to stop diverting money from affordable housing trust funds — expected to collect \$300 million this year — to other priorities.

“That’s ridiculous. This is a growing state,” Nazworth said. “Help them understand the impact their decisions have.”

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