

UT study: Housing the homeless saves taxpayers money

By [Keith Morelli](#)



Jonathan Offermann, 45, talks about his good fortune to have a home in Cypress Landing, an apartment complex for chronically homeless. ANDY JONES/STAFF

TAMPA — Providing homes for 17 chronically homeless people in Hillsborough County saved taxpayers nearly half a million dollars over a year and a half, according to a University of Tampa cost-benefit analysis.

Permanent housing meant fewer emergency room visits, detox services, nights in emergency shelters and stays in the county jail. The study, conducted by the University of Tampa, said the savings to taxpayers comes from having to spend less for those services.

From the start, homeless advocates had said the so-called housing first model would significantly cut other costs. The UT study is the first local look at the numbers, and seems to bear out that prediction.

All 17 people who were the focus of the report were once categorized as chronically homeless and took up permanent homes two years ago at the 24-unit [Cypress Landing](#) building in northern Tampa. The federal government paid \$2.1 million to buy the building and renovate it.

The study found the residents had visited the emergency room a total 62 times at a total cost of nearly \$197,000 before they moved into the housing. Since then, members of the group had made 12 trips at a cost of just over \$38,000.

More dramatic is the use of detox services, which totaled 148 visits at a cost of just over \$27,000 before they moved into the apartments. After they moved into housing, none of the 17 used detox services, the report said.

And before the move-in, the study's participants spent 1,140 nights in the county jail, at a cost of \$82,000. Since then, they spent 196 nights in jail at a cost of just over \$14,000, or an 83 percent decrease.

“By providing housing to chronically homeless persons at Cypress Landing which both anchored their lives in a space of their own and allowed us to better reach them with services, the costs of providing for this population were markedly reduced and the personal benefits to the homeless increased,” the report concluded.

The report was released this week, through the [Tampa Hillsborough Homeless Initiative](#).

“For over a decade, many in this profession have discussed ending homelessness,” said Antoinette Hayes-Triplett, director of the initiative, said in a news release. “The response from the general public is ‘We will always have homeless people.’ ”

She said that may be true, but much can be done to minimize the numbers of homeless and the impact of homelessness on the community. “Functional zero” is the concept, she said.

“Simply put, functional zero is reached when a community has developed plans and strategies to ensure that homelessness is rare, short, and non-reoccurring.”

She said the study and the data gathered in it are part of a five-year strategic plan on homelessness being developed by the Tampa/Hillsborough County Continuum of Care, which is headed by the initiative and includes a collaboration of government agencies, private companies, faith-based and nonprofit organizations.

Among the agencies involved: Steps Forward, a nonprofit corporation organized by Tampa and Hillsborough County business leaders to provide housing for the homeless.

[Steps Forward](#), which spearheaded the Cypress Landing project, has plans to buy and renovate other small apartment buildings throughout the city and county with a stated goal of having 500 units available for chronically homeless people within five years.

[Gracepoint](#) handles the day-to-day interactions with the residents of Cypress Landing by providing case management and treatment to address behavioral health, substance abuse and developmental challenges, considered a key element in the success of the housing-first model.

Joseph F. Rutherford, chief executive officer of Gracepoint, said he was “pleasantly surprised” by the numbers in the cost-benefit analysis.

“It’s nice to be validated,” he said. “Everything we do is measured by outcomes. The impact on the community, the numbers of dollars saved for a relatively small population ... for me it becomes no longer an academic argument, but a real benefit to community.”

He said the savings in taxpayer-funded services is somewhat offset by “substantial” money that goes into the project on a daily basis.

For example, each resident gets a \$765 a month rent subsidy from the Tampa Housing Authority, but that money is available for anyone who is eligible for housing assistance.

Some of the residents have jobs, and they are required to pitch in 30 percent of their income toward rent.

Gracepoint has a contract with the county to provide “wrap-around” services for the formerly homeless living at Cypress Landing, and many of those services are available without leaving the complex.

The county budgeted \$207,000 this fiscal year to pay for those services. Rutherford said Gracepoint has billed the county \$108,000 of that amount.

Among those living in Cypress Landing is Jonathan Offermann, 45, who said the biggest advantage of living there is safety.

“It’s much safer than on the streets, safer and more comfortable ” said Offermann, who has lived in his apartment for eight months. “It’s nice to have a bed to sleep in and not to have to sleep with one eye open.”

He had been homeless for about four years. He is in a wheelchair and couldn’t get around to the various locations to apply for assistance.

Now, he has the services he needs and doesn’t have to travel for them.

“This place is tremendous,” he said. “I would like to continue building my apartment to make it a home.”

Across the neatly kept courtyard was Audrey Guyton, 63, who has lived at Cypress Landing since it opened three years ago.

“This has been a wonderful home,” said the Tampa native who had been homeless for 15 years before moving into her apartment.

She said her life on the street was “horrific.” She said she had worked for Walt Disney World, but lost her car and then her job and then her home.

“It put me into a spin,” she said, that lasted a decade-and-a-half.

But no longer.

“Things have been going so well since I’ve moved here,” she said. “Things are looking up.”

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