

Homelessness in Knoxville and the Proposed Tiny Home Project on Ascension Property

June 25, 2026

The Proposed Tiny Home Community

1. Bo and Beth Townsend have proposed building a tiny home community to provide permanent supportive housing to 15 individuals who are currently experiencing homelessness. (“The Tiny Home Community”, or THC)
2. The Church of the Ascension owns record title to 9.22 acres of land located at 800 S. Northshore Drive. Over 2 acres of the land behind the church parking lot has been undeveloped since its purchase in 1997. This property is the site of the proposed tiny home community.
3. The Townsends have formed a 501(c)(3) nonprofit, God in my Backyard LLC (“GIMBY”), who would raise the funds, construct, and manage the THC through its board of directors.
4. GIMBY and the Ascension, with the support and approval of the Diocese, would enter into a long-term ground lease of the identified 2-acre tract. The lease would provide indemnification from liability of the church and the Diocese and would grant Ascension an early termination of the lease under certain circumstances such as 1) Ascension deciding it needs the property for church purposes or 2) GIMBY dissolves and no other nonprofit is willing to manage the THC. The THC would also carry sufficient liability insurance with Ascension as an additional insured.
5. The funds needed to design and build the THC will be raised privately by GIMBY. GIMBY is not seeking any type of financial support from Ascension.
6. GIMBY will hire case management support for the THC residents by hiring Volunteer Ministry Center (VMC), Helen Ross McNabb Center, or KCDC (Knoxville Community Development Corporation), which are the main 3 social service agencies providing case management services for individual seeking to acquire and keep permanent, stable housing. This would include the vetting of the candidates for housing (CHAMP assessments) to help ensure that the resident is ready to access housing and stay housed. Link to CHAMP: <https://knoxhmis.sworpswebapp.sworps.utk.edu/champ/> Potential residents will need to demonstrate the ability to live on her/his own with minimal support from the case manager.
7. Property management services will most like be provided by Emerald Housing Management, which provides management services to developments like ours all over the

state. Emerald Housing is a trusted management company in the industry, and currently manages VMC's Caswell Manor and Minvilla Manor, among other developments. There will be no need for Ascension or any member of its staff to interact with the THC residents regarding property or case management issues.

8. Residents will pay rent either through their own means, through rent assistance via housing vouchers issued by KCDC, through other government assistance, or by a combination of income sources. The rent will be set commensurate with the current voucher rate for the 37919-area code. This amount for 2026 is \$1,360 for a studio and \$1,690 for a 2-bedroom unit. We anticipate the 1-bedroom tiny homes to be around 400 square feet, with full kitchen, bath, and stackable washer/dryer. The rental income will be sufficient to cover all costs of running the THC plus generating monthly capital reserve funds for future repairs and maintenance.
9. Residents will sign a lease before occupying a tiny home, and violations of the lease will result in eviction.
10. Although not currently zoned for this type of development, GIMBY will not seek to rezone the property and will instead apply for a religious exemption. This has been done successfully in Knoxville by Angelic Ministries and by CareCuts, 2 local faith-based nonprofits. There is also a case on point decided by the Tennessee Court of Appeals recently. In **Dayle Ward v. Metropolitan Government**, Glencliff United Methodist Church of Nashville wanted to build **22 tiny homes** on its property to help homeless people transitioning from hospital stays. Normally, zoning laws wouldn't allow this kind of housing in that neighborhood. But the church asked for a religious accommodation, saying that helping the homeless is part of its religious mission. The City's zoning administrator agreed and allowed the project. Neighbors disagreed and appealed the decision, arguing the project should follow normal zoning rules. The neighbors argued that the tiny homes would be built and run by Open Table Nashville, a nonprofit that isn't a church, and because of that the project was not a religious activity. Both the trial court and the Tennessee Court of appeals disagreed. The Court found that the project is part of the church's religious exercise since the church and Open Table both described their work with the homeless as faith-driven, with the tiny home project growing out of that mission. The court also found that normal zoning rules substantially burdened the church's religious practice because full zoning compliance would delay the project, increase costs, and slow the church's ability to help people in urgent need. (case provided upon request).

Facts and Statistics about Homelessness

1. The City of Knoxville and Knoxville County record the number of unhoused individuals, which can be accessed at knoxhousing.org. The most recent Annual Point-in-Time (PIT) Count for Knoxville-Knox County, conducted on January 22, 2025, found 1,174 people without stable housing on that night, according to [Knoxtnhousing.org](https://knoxhousing.org). This included:
 - **814** in emergency shelters
 - **115** in transitional housing
 - **245** unsheltered (living outdoors or in other non-housing settings)
2. The PIT count is a federally mandated census that aims to capture the number of individuals experiencing homelessness on a single night. It is known to **underestimate** the true number because volunteers cannot always locate every person living unsheltered.

Key Findings from the 2025 PIT Report

- Most unsheltered individuals are local residents; many having lived in Knox County for years before losing housing.
- Shelter capacity was exceeded even with over 400 warming center beds added due to extreme cold.
- Rising housing costs are a major driver: median rent has increased 62% since 2020, while average wages rose only 15%.
- Youth and young adults (18–24) face high rates of first-time homelessness and mental health challenges.
- Warming centers helped bring many indoors, but this also highlighted the need for more permanent, safe housing options.

3. Context from KnoxHMIS Data

According to the Knoxville Homeless Intake and Management System (KnoxHMIS), in Q4 2025:

- Average daily homeless population: ~1,757
- Average daily stably housed population: ~660
- Average daily “at risk” population: ~248
- Average daily “unknown” (meals/services only): ~216 [City of Knoxville](#)

About 69% of new clients in 2025 were from Knoxville or Knox County, showing that homelessness is concentrated locally.

Trends

- The 2025 PIT count was higher than the 2023 count (925 in 2023, 1,174 in 2025), though the 2023 figure was lower due to reduced shelter capacity and fewer observed homeless individuals [WBIR.com](#).
- Knoxville has seen **the largest rent growth in the U.S. in 2022**, with average rents above \$1,400/month [WBIR.com](#).

In summary: Knoxville-Knox County's homeless population is significant, with over 1,100 people counted in 2025, most unsheltered and many local residents. Housing cost pressures, stagnant wages, and limited shelter capacity are key drivers, and while warming centers have temporarily reduced visible homelessness, the underlying problem of affordable housing has not been solved.

4. Housing, particularly permanent supportive housing, is a proven and effective solution to solve homelessness. Permanent supportive housing combines affordable housing with supportive services (such as assistance with birth certificates/driver licenses for identification, mental health services, medical services, clothing and food) to help individuals experiencing homelessness, particularly those with disabilities or chronic health issues. Research consistently shows that this model is effective in reducing homelessness and improving housing stability. For instance, in 2024, there were over 412,000 permanent supportive housing beds in the U.S., with studies indicating that this approach significantly decreases rates of chronic homelessness (source: [urban.org](#)).
5. Volunteer Ministry Center currently operates Minvilla Manor (since 2011) and Caswell Manor (since 2023), which collectively provide permanent, stable and supportive housing for 98 individuals who were previously chronically homeless.
6. According to statistics published by the KHMIS, 99% of homeless individuals once permanently housed stayed housed. KnoxHMIS cites [Homelessness is a Housing Problem](#), noting the reason some cities have more homelessness than others **isn't about individual vulnerabilities**. Cities with higher levels of homelessness don't generally have higher rates of drug use or mental illness, and most communities with higher poverty rates have lower levels of homelessness. Instead, when comparing one city to another, **the root causes of homelessness almost always come down to housing**. As a rule, U.S. cities are more likely to have high rates of homelessness when their inhabitants face two things: **higher rent and fewer available rentals**. **Median rent** compares monthly rental costs between Knoxville, Tennessee, and the United States. Likewise, occupancy rates highlight how “tight” the Knoxville market is compared with state and national trends: the higher the rate, the fewer rental units are available to those in search of housing. It's a salient fact: [Knoxville saw the greatest rent growth in the country in 2022](#).

7. Churches own the greatest amount of private land in the US. According to widowsmite.org, US churches own collectively over 2.3 million acres of land, with the Catholic church holding an endowment of over 1 billion acres.

Faith Facts

1. Love your neighbor as yourself. *Leviticus 19:18* and *Matthew 22:39*
2. The parable of the Good Samaritan told by Jesus in the Gospel of *Luke (10:25-37)*
Neighbors are not limited by race, religion or social standing. True love requires active mercy toward anyone in need.
3. Faith, without works, is dead. *James 2:26* Simply believing in God is not enough, true faith must be actively demonstrated through good deeds, love, and service to others.
4. Salvation is free, but it's not cheap. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*
5. Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me. *Matthew 25:40-45 NIV*
6. Foxes have dens and birds have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.
Luke 9:58

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