



A tarp covers a portion of a homeless person's tent on a bridge overlooking the 101 Freeway Feb. 2 in Los Angeles. A study of homelessness in California released in June found that "a quarter (24%) of participants noted they could not find housing that meets their needs due to a physical disability; 14% indicated that this impacted their ability to find housing a lot." (AP photo/Jae C. Hong, File)



by Aleja Hertzler-McCain

[View Author Profile](#)

[Join the Conversation](#)

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. [Learn more](#)

August 22, 2023

[Share on Bluesky](#)[Share on Facebook](#)[Share on Twitter](#)[Email to a friend](#)[Print](#)

Sandra Conley has been on the list for public housing in Mobile, Alabama, for four years, while coping without an accessible apartment. "There is so little affordable, accessible housing," she said.

Conley, a born-again Christian who was born with a leg length discrepancy and then became an amputee, is the director of community affairs for a newly established Mobile nonprofit working to create a micro house village for [chronically homeless](#) people, including those who are disabled.

Across the U.S., disabled people facing homelessness endure unique struggles because of a shortage of affordable, accessible housing, a lack of funding for housing assistance and seemingly unending bureaucratic mazes.

Conley said she became involved in the [Driftwood Housing](#) project while she was recovering in a nursing home from surgery. When staff tried to send her back to her wheelchair-inaccessible apartment before she could safely put weight on her foot, she used fierce self-advocacy to stay in the nursing home, and also was able to avoid losing her apartment while being sent to an accessible group home.



Sandra Conley is the director of community affairs for a newly established Mobile nonprofit working to create a micro house village for chronically homeless people, including those who are disabled. (Courtesy of Sandra Conley)

Conley plans to use those advocacy skills to support people experiencing homelessness, especially because she knows the struggles of finding affordable, accessible housing.

A landmark [study](#) of homelessness in California, which has a disproportionate percentage of the U.S. homeless population, released in June by the University of California, San Francisco, found that "a quarter (24%) of participants noted they could not find housing that meets their needs due to a physical disability; 14% indicated that this impacted their ability to find housing a lot."

Allie Cannington, senior manager of advocacy and organizing for [The Kelsey](#), a California-based organization that advocates for and develops accessible, affordable housing, said, "Our housing infrastructure has failed to create the commensurate supply of accessible housing that is needed for the growing population that is people with disabilities."

Susan J. Popkin, a fellow at the Urban Institute and co-director of the institute's Disability Equity Policy Initiative, agreed. "We have not built enough accessible housing at any income levels."

Popkin compared the issue of the growing aging population of the U.S. to climate change. "It's been obvious for decades that the baby boom was all going to get old," and that "there would be a lot more people who needed help and needed accessible housing and needed community care," she said.

Advertisement

Yet, Popkin said, "somehow we seem to be surprised by the fact that that has happened."

Popkin and Cannington, who are both disabled, co-authored [research](#) that found that 18 million disabled people are not receiving federal housing assistance even though they are eligible based on low-income status.

"There has been a lack of support for federal housing assistance. It's been underfunded for decades," said Popkin.

Beyond housing stock and funding, bureaucratic hurdles can be a major challenge for disabled people experiencing homelessness.



Emily I. Brown, who has anxiety and depression in addition to other undiagnosed disabilities, lost her housing in September 2022. (NCR screenshot)

Emily I. Brown, who has anxiety and depression in addition to other undiagnosed disabilities, lost her housing in September 2022. Navigating long lists of phone numbers and endless referrals as she searched for help in Missouri, then Denver, then Albuquerque, was overwhelming and too often fruitless.

When Brown spoke to NCR in early July, she was in a time-limited shelter hoping she could see the necessary people and find the necessary documents to get a housing voucher before time ran out.

In the meantime, navigating homelessness while disabled has been deeply uncomfortable. Brown said she has struggled in crowded, noisy shelters without privacy due to her sensory processing issues, and she sometimes becomes ill from not eating because she can't access food she can eat.

Brown advises policymakers to streamline the process for connecting people with caseworkers and other resources.

Many homelessness service providers are using a [housing first](#) method, a [cost-effective](#) approach where people experiencing homelessness are provided housing before attempting to address any causes of homelessness, unlike programs requiring a person to participate in programming before receiving housing.

"After one year, 98% of folks in our permanent supportive housing program maintained stably housed, which really shows that housing ends homelessness," said Jesse Rabinowitz, senior manager of policy and advocacy at Miriam's Kitchen, a D.C. nonprofit devoted to ending chronic homelessness.



Jesse Rabinowitz, senior manager of policy and advocacy at Miriam's Kitchen, a D.C. nonprofit devoted to ending chronic homelessness, said, "After one year, 98% of folks in our permanent supportive housing program maintained stably housed, which really shows that housing ends homelessness." (Courtesy of Jesse Rabinowitz)

Catholic Charities of Baltimore utilizes a housing first approach and has five different programs providing permanent supportive housing for formerly homeless people with disabilities.

Some of the programs help families find their own housing that meets their needs, while others have shared and accessible housing operated by Catholic Charities with

individual rooms for residents.

Rodney Lee, who has been with Catholic Charities of Baltimore for 26 years, said that Catholic Charities then provides services to help clients maintain that housing.

"Every client that comes into our services is given the opportunity to create their own trajectory of services and their plan and how they want that plan to look" while setting their own goals, Lee said.

These services can include occupational or physical therapy, or mental health or substance abuse care or support with employment, family or school.

In D.C., the city council has allocated local funding to supplement the limited federal funding for permanent supportive housing for chronically homeless people.

Adam Maier, director of housing partnerships at [Pathways to Housing DC](#), which provides permanent housing to people with disabilities experiencing homelessness through a housing first model, said that the local funding makes D.C. "the model for what could be done across the country."

[Related: 'Motels4Now' project near Notre Dame offers housing for South Bend homeless people](#)

According to Maier, who was raised Catholic but now attends the nondenominational National Community Church, funding for housing remains in D.C. budget's because of community advocacy, including strong support from the faith community and Catholic churches.

Yet, even with this financial commitment to ending homelessness, an [incredibly ineffective](#) D.C. Housing Authority and a large number of unused housing vouchers illustrate pitfalls that funding alone has not solved.

Rabinowitz analyzed [D.C. government data](#), showing only 32% of vouchers from fiscal year 2022 and none of the vouchers from fiscal year 2023 for permanent supportive housing have been used, even as many lack housing.

Michael Broughton, the clinical coordinator at the [Father McKenna Center](#), which supports men experiencing homelessness in Washington, has seen bureaucratic processes prevent the center's disabled guests from acquiring housing.



Michael Broughton, the clinical coordinator at the Father McKenna Center, which supports men experiencing homelessness in Washington, has seen bureaucratic processes prevent the center's disabled guests from acquiring housing. (Courtesy of Michael Broughton)

Broughton said that one of the center's guests, who uses a wheelchair and has multiple disabilities, was connected with a housing opportunity six months ago but hasn't been able to move in because the process stalled after the inspection stage of the new housing.

After receiving a voucher for housing, another older guest who uses a wheelchair was told that his paperwork never arrived and that he would have to restart the

process, said Broughton, who stayed on at the center after doing a year of service there with the Franciscan Mission Service.

At the national level, Cannington and The Kelsey are part of a coalition proposing the [VITAL Act](#) (Visitable Inclusive Tax credits for Accessible Living) as a housing supply solution. The act would require developers using the Low-Income Housing Tax Credit to create accessible housing for people with mobility and sensory disabilities and incentivize developers to create housing that is walkable or rollable to employment. The VITAL Act has been [introduced](#) in both chambers of Congress and has bipartisan support in the House.

Cannington also encouraged investments in home and community-based supportive services because, without them, disabled people can end up on the streets or in institutional settings.

Jarrett Smith, government relations advocate for Network Lobby for Catholic Social Justice, told NCR in an email that "NETWORK supports full funding of housing programs that aim to eliminate the challenges faced by people with disabilities when accessing housing."

Advocates for ending homelessness lamented the lack of public will to fund programs that end homelessness.

"Prioritizing anything over" meeting people's basic needs "is just alarming," said Broughton, quoting [Matthew 25:40](#).

Broughton and Maier both spoke of the importance of forming relationships with people experiencing homelessness, especially because of their isolation. Broughton called this work a "ministry of presence."

Rabinowitz spoke of the need to change the prevailing narratives that "homelessness has always existed" and has no solution and that homelessness is a person's fault.

Brown highlighted that bad mental health and drug use are often caused by homelessness, not the other way around. "You can only be out here on the street fighting for survival, while much of society looks at you with apathy and disgust, before the sheer stress and despair of it all either breaks your brain, or makes you turn to some substance to numb that pain," she texted NCR.

Rabinowitz agreed that, while disability can lead to homelessness, homelessness often decimates a person's health and leads to disability.

"Ending chronic homelessness really is a matter of life and [death](#)," said Rabinowitz, underscoring those health consequences.

Popkin expressed concern about a punitive approach to homelessness gaining prominence. "We're going to incarcerate people, we're going to force them to accept treatment. That is the old way, and it's worrying to see that rhetoric coming back," she said.

"Homelessness is not an individual failing. It's a communal failing," said Rabinowitz. "Homelessness isn't an individual choice, but it's a policy choice."

[This article was made possible by a grant from the Hilton Foundation.]

This story appears in the **Catholic Responses to Homelessness** feature series. [View the full series.](#)