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# Why Riverside's mayor is sleeping in an 8-by-8 metal shed to help the homeless

*PE Article 12.14.19*

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PUBLISHED: December 14, 2019 at 8:00 am | UPDATED: December 14, 2019 at 10:53 am

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*(Photo by Watchara Phomicinda, The Press-Enterprise/SCNG)*

Riverside Mayor Rusty Bailey looks over materials after waking up in a small shelter near the Path of Life Ministries homeless shelter in Riverside on Wednesday, Dec. 11, 2019.

As he slept, Riverside Mayor Rusty Bailey's feet could have touched the aluminum door and his arm could have touched the opposite wall.

Not that he would have let either out of his sleeping bag, when the nighttime temperature had dropped to 42 degrees outside and it was almost as cold inside the uninsulated structure.

But his shelter — 8 feet long and 8 feet wide, made mostly of aluminum — was much more comfortable than his neighbors' tents.



Riverside Mayor Rusty Bailey reads as he beds down for the night in an 8-by-8 shelter near a homeless shelter in Riverside on Tuesday, Dec. 10, 2019. Bailey, who spends three to four nights a week in the 64-square-foot shelter, believes the small units could help solve the city's homeless problem.

Several nights a week since October — 10 to 15 times as of Thursday, Dec. 12 — Bailey has spent the night in the shed-like shelter outside the [homeless shelter](#) on Hulen Place in Riverside, he said.

*(Photo by Will Lester, Inland Valley Daily Bulletin/SCNG)*

His goal is to draw attention to the urgency of the city's homeless crisis and to promote what he sees as one part of the solution — shelters like the one he's used as a temporary second home. If 10 of them were put in the parking lot next to the shelter, that could house up to 40 people — a step toward the [439 people living without shelter](#) in the city as of a January count.

A longtime crusader on the homeless issue, Bailey wants the City Council to approve similar structures at its Tuesday, Dec. 17, meeting. City officials say that would mean they could be in place by March 2020 — about the time the mayor could leave office to lead Path of Life Ministries, which runs the city's shelter — although Bailey wants faster action.

The City Council will consider several options to add to the city's 180 shelter beds. Twenty shelters by the company that built Bailey's structure, [Pallet](#), would cost \$495,680 to start up and \$1.3 million for operations, which could come from the Measure Z sales tax that Riverside voters approved or from California's Homeless Emergency Aid Program. Other possible ways to add beds could cost from \$324,000 to \$5.4 million, according to a report by Hafsa Kaka, the new head of the city's Office of Homeless Solutions.

Bailey's Pallet shelter includes two beds — there can be as many as four — and a shelf. It's designed to include a heater and air conditioner, though Bailey's isn't connected to a power source. It has no bathroom or running water.

"It's a dignified, stable structure," he said. "Once someone has that, we can address their other needs."

Those who woke up on the street next to Bailey on Wednesday, Dec. 11, said they would have loved to spend the night inside the shed-like building.

"This lock is great, because otherwise, people will take your stuff," said Charles Miller, 21, who said he's been living on the street or in the homeless shelter for about a year, since his ex-boyfriend kicked him out of the apartment they had shared. "You have a little space to yourself. I miss that."

About every other night, Bailey finishes his official duties, heads home to his family, then about 9 p.m. arrives at his temporary home. Sometimes he's alone, but sometimes he meets until about midnight with a community member.

One of those was the Rev. Steven B. Borst of Immanuel Lutheran Church in Riverside, who offered his church's financial support.

"As I was praying for your well-being and safety tonight, it struck me that if I am concerned about my mayor sleeping on skid row, I should also be concerned with every person sleeping there tonight as well," he wrote in an email to Bailey.

Bailey said that if the council approves, the shelters could be installed on the property of willing property owners within a week or so.



But there are roadblocks that lead city officials to think March is more realistic.

For example, California requires the room that someone lives in to be at least 70 square feet. The Pallet shelter that's available now is 64 square feet.

Bailey understands the idea of the requirement — making sure people have quality housing — but he says it's putting lives at risk.

He gestured at the worn tents outside the shelter where people have been sleeping.

"Is this safe? Would we rather someone sleep there than a 64-square-foot shelter that's safe and dignified?" he asked. "The bureaucracy of it frustrates me ... We've got to be mindful of the letter of the law and the spirit of the law."

Pallet, the company that produces the shelters, could make 70-square-foot versions for California, spokesman Brandon Bills said.

"We're happy to build a 70-square-foot version to comply with California (law)," Bills said. "Really, the difference we're talking about is the timeline for implementation. We have a lot of 64-square-foot units right now and we could be down there next week getting people off the street. If we need to do 70 square feet ... the lead time goes from 48 hours to maybe a few months."



Bailey wouldn't be happy with that.

"That's months of our neighbors without homes living in the cold and maybe dying in the cold," he said.

The emergency shelters could help, said Casey Jackson, who is serving as interim CEO of Path of Life.

"The more housing we have, temporary or permanent, the more we can do," Jackson said.

Kaka said she would carry out whatever plan the City Council favors.

Pallet also makes a 100-square-foot version, which [Sacramento is preparing to build](#) if the City Council approves the proposal by that city's mayor, Bills said.

Near the Everett, Washington, headquarters of Pallet, Tacoma bought 40 Pallet shelters in 2017, which cost \$260,000. The City Council bought another 18 in July, city spokeswoman Megan Snow said. Tacoma estimates its homeless population to be 436, similar to Riverside's.

Also in California, Oakland has installed similar structures called [Tuff Shed](#). That's another option the council will consider.

"They have insulation, Sheetrock, double-pane windows, locking door, roof. It's not aluminum-sided," Oakland spokesman Justin Berton said.

Pallet's shelters now have more insulation than the prototype Bailey is using, Bills said. California law requires the homeless be provided heat, so the heating and air conditioning within the shelters would keep the temperature between 70 and 90 degrees, he said.

Eventually, churches and perhaps businesses or even residents could put the shelters on their property, where people could live in them for a short time. The time limit, as well as limits on where they could be installed, would need to be approved by the City Council.

Some residents who oppose the city's general approach to homelessness say the move seems more likely to hurt residents.

“Let’s say the business next to you decides to put one of these in,” said Kim Lindsey, co-founder of a group called Riverside Strong that wants a more law enforcement-focused approach to problems caused by vagrant people. “The vagrants can still cause problems for you, especially if they’re not going to have a shower or bathroom.”

The nonprofit’s board [chose Bailey to become its CEO](#) when he leaves office, which could be after the March primary or after the November general election if none of the candidates for mayor receives a majority of the vote.

Pallet originally designed the structures with a bathroom and kitchen, then hired formerly homeless employees who advised against that, Bills said.

“They said, ‘If I had all of that when I was homeless, I wouldn’t have felt a need to leave,’” he said. “Our goal is to get people out of homelessness, so we redesigned them.”



Pallet’s website states the [8-by-8 shelters start at \\$4,500](#), though a bulk discount is available for cities or nonprofits that buy more. The higher cost for Riverside includes the need to straighten out the parking lot next to the homeless shelter.

Videos show Pallet structures being assembled in 20 minutes, though Bailey — who was working at night — said he took two hours.

“It’s like IKEA furniture,” Bills said. “The first one, you might not know what to do, but after a few you could do it in no time. With Riverside, we’ve offered to help set them up.”

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Meanwhile, other efforts — from enforcing the law when people are caught breaking it to building more affordable housing — continue, Bailey said.

The morning he met Miller, the 21-year-old homeless man, he called Rainbow Marler, the director of a Riverside shelter for [homeless people aged 18 to 24](#).

By that night, Bailey said, Miller was staying in the shelter.

## IF YOU GO

**What:** Riverside City Council will discuss emergency homeless shelters

**When:** 7 p.m. Tuesday, Dec. 17

**Where:** Council chambers at Riverside City Hall, 3900 Main St.