

# One Group's Vision To Tackle Homelessness: Creating Eco-Friendly Shelters

By Diana Aguilera

*Fresno's homeless problem has been at the forefront of many debates. But there's one group in town that's created a new model for homeless housing. FM89's Diana Aguilera reports on the expansion of a housing project on Dakota Avenue.*

Listen

Listening...

3:57

Over a year ago Nancy Holmes had nowhere to go after she was evicted from a homeless encampment in downtown Fresno. Holmes ended up on a dusty piece of land on the west side of the city.

"When I was out there I didn't worry about a future. I didn't think about a future I didn't have one," says 63-year-old Nancy. "What future? What path? I could care if I lived or died."

As her asthma had worsened Holmes knew she had to find somewhere to go. After two weeks, she found a place to call home.

*"The Dakota Eco Garden has given me a new path. I do care if I live or die," she says. "I do go to the doctor, I do try to quit smoking. I do have something to say."*

Nancy Holmes went from living on the streets to living at the Dakota Eco Garden.

Credit Diana Aguilera / Valley Public Radio

Holmes is living at a communal project for the homeless on Dakota Avenue in a neighborhood in Central Fresno. But this isn't like most housing options available to those without a home. This project is becoming the first site for an eco-friendly community.

As Holmes and I walk in the backyard by some tents surrounded by solar panels, there's another type of shelter close by:

"This is the Dakota Eco Structure, come here we'll take a look at it," Holmes says.

She explains how this small unit generates its own heat and air conditioning.

"The water jugs in the front absorb the heat from the sun during the day and heat it. And then the stove pipe on top, there's another pipe over here on the ground, and it draws the cool air from underground inside for the summer time."



On Sunday they're breaking grounds to build a second eco shelter right across from the original one.

"That tent area will come down and that's when the new structure will go and it's like egg-shaped," Holmes says. They're able to build the unit with money donated from Temple Beth Israel. Both eco shelters are designed by well-known local architect Art Dyson.



The first Dakota Eco Shelter is on the right and one of the remaining tents is on the left.

Credit Diana Aguilera / Valley Public Radio

"It's given me a reason to go on and a good feeling inside that I'm helping be a part of something that's so much bigger than just property, some tents and some people." -Nancy Holmes

Homeless advocates involved in the project say their hope is to build more eco shelters to replace the tents.

"It's one step up from a tent. It would be something that would be possible," advocate Beverly Fitzpatrick says. "We wouldn't have to do it quite as elaborate but if we could build something like that for homeless people think how wonderful that would be."

Fitzpatrick says she volunteers there because she's able to see people's lives transform.

“Just think about people who use to live on the sidewalk and now have some dignity and live even in a tent back here.”

After walking past the eco shelter and the tents, Nancy Holmes and I are welcomed by an organic vegetable and fruit garden.

Nancy Holmes stands by the organic garden in the backyard of the property in central Fresno.

Credit Diana Aguilera / Valley Public Radio

“We had some of the biggest coli flours I’ve ever seen in my life come out of here and these are the strawberries, blackberries, boysenberries and that’s our kale,” Holmes says.

Everyone that lives there grows and eats their own fruits and vegetables. The green scenery that surrounds Holmes is strikingly different from the dusty piece of land where she lived after being evicted in 2013. Holmes, known as the house mother by the rest, says living at Dakota Eco Garden has changed her life.

“It’s given me a reason to go on and a good feeling inside that I’m helping be a part of something that’s so much bigger than just property and some tents and some people,” she says. “It’s a new way for people to think about homelessness.”



Local advocates say their goal is to one day receive enough donations to build an entire eco village. They say this is just the start of their efforts to help more homeless people get off the streets.