

Providence Park makes village for Little Rock homeless

written by Katie Zakrzewski |



Errin Stanger, founder and CEO of Providence Park, shows Arkansas Catholic development plans for Providence Park from inside a tiny home model June 4. (Katie Zakrzewski)

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Every morning as Errin Stanger unlocked the front doors of the Arkansas Regional Innovation Hub in downtown North Little Rock, she found herself talking with the homeless people who gathered under the building's awning for shelter.

Stanger, who had been the director for three years, would provide the homeless people she encountered with resources and information, but she often saw the same individuals soon after, grappling with the same needs again.

"I could find what they needed right now — is it food? Is it a shower? Let's get them out of the heat," Stanger said. "And I realized that I was able to find that immediate help, but I started looking for more long-term care for the chronically homeless."

Stanger, not wanting to reinvent the wheel, began researching long-term solutions for homeless populations, alongside her friend Pulaski County Judge Barry Hyde. In 2022, she discovered the Community First! Village in Austin, Texas.

Stanger traveled to Austin to meet Community First! Village founder Alan Graham, who created the community concept after becoming familiar with the needs of the homeless through his first nonprofit, Mobile Loaves and Fishes, which started in 1998. Mobile Loaves and Fishes delivered hot meals and supplies to the homeless in Austin, but the mobile van's design is unique. Workers with Mobile Loaves and Fishes open the sides of the truck to hand out supplies, instead of handing them to the homeless from within the truck.

Graham created a master-planned village in 2004 designed to restore human dignity by giving the homeless more than just the essentials but a community and means of earning a living.

Residents have tiny homes and pay rent each month. The Village has several work opportunities to help residents, referred to as neighbors, earn income, such as a community works program, a car care center, a hair salon and a community garden.

The Village in Austin, with more than 50 acres, features 397 tiny homes, art house, organic garden, medical clinic, worship center, communal gathering spots and memorial gardens. The Village recently completed \$150 million capital campaign for an additional 1,100 homes.

"Of all the places that I visited, it resonated with me in a way that I can't really describe," Stanger said. "I arrived, got out of my car and said, 'Oh my goodness.'"

Graham told Stanger he designed the Community First! Village model to be replicated and gave Stanger the information and tools necessary to bring a similar community to central Arkansas.

When she returned home, Stanger told Hyde about her trip. A hobbyist pilot, Hyde flew to Austin in 2022 shortly after Stanger returned. Hyde was so impressed that upon his return, he bought 150 acres of county land near Fourche Creek June 8, 2022, to make the project a reality.

Since then, Stanger has been assembling a team to help plan and construct Providence Park at 6900 Green Road in Mabelvale.

One board member is Mandy Davis, director of community outreach at CHI St. Vincent and former director of Jericho Way, the city's only day resource for the homeless.

"My background as a social worker is in serving people experiencing homelessness — from crisis intervention to building housing," Davis said.

Davis served on the county's commission for the Providence Park project and became a board member after her work with the commission was completed.

Another board member is Dr. Lee Wilbur, a member of Christ the King Church in Little Rock who co-founded the Divine Mercy Health Center with his wife Lori.

"The mission of Divine Mercy Health Center and Providence Park share a goal to serve the vulnerable and marginalized," Wilbur said. "This includes finding creative ways to improve the quality of life for our chronically unsheltered brothers and sisters. As a faith-inspired ministry that connects vulnerable populations to essential resources throughout the community, DMHC has served primarily in an advisory capacity for Providence Park to explore innovative solutions to help those most in need."

Wilbur said he has seen the impact of housing insecurity on the health of many Arkansans.

"Housing insecurity is one of the social determinants of health that prevent those from achieving their best health," Wilbur said. "Poor housing or lack of housing compounds the deleterious effects of chronic disease like diabetes, heart disease and hypertension."

Wilbur said plans to have a medical facility on-site at Providence Park are crucial to supporting this population.

"As a practicing emergency physician, I witness on a daily basis how the health care system is poorly designed to best serve the unsheltered population," Wilbur said. "More often than not, the homeless and unsheltered population have complex medical and social needs that are best addressed through an interdisciplinary approach."

Stanger said the experience taught her to "let go and let God." After 10 years at the Innovation Hub, Stanger stepped down April 30 to focus on Providence Park. On May 14, Providence Park had its groundbreaking ceremony.

"The land is cleared, and it is today actually that utilities are starting to go in as we speak," Stanger told Arkansas Catholic June 4. "Construction started with putting the roads in and the infrastructure."

Stanger, a 1994 graduate of Mount St. Mary Academy in Little Rock, said Providence Park is in the master planning phase of design right now, bidding on bigger buildings and working on building systems and home designs.

Phase 1 consists of constructing 68 small units and 32 large units. Residents will rent tiny houses with different floor plans to choose from, and all homes will be solar-powered. Some units will have bathrooms, while others will be near buildings with private toilets and showers. Communal kitchens will encourage residents to develop relationships and community with one another.

Phase 1 will also consist of an administrative building, health services building, work opportunities for community members, a garden, community kitchen and a village bus stop and store. Health care on the property will include physical, dental and mental health services.

In future phases of construction, Stanger hopes to build an additional 250 small units and 124 large units.

Stanger said the project is expected to cost at least \$10 million but could double as the project is finalized.

“The infrastructure dollars are from American Rescue Plans funds that Pulaski County Judge Barry Hyde has set aside,” she said. “The rest of the funding comes from my nonprofit, Refuge Village. We are a 501c3 responsible for funding the rest of the project. I am constantly working on grants, building relationships with donors and open to private and public partnerships.”

Between now and January 2025, Providence Park plans to design and build the tiny homes, kitchen, bathroom and laundry areas, as well as the health clinic and a communal hall. By June 2025, she hopes to move neighbors into the village with access to homes, food and amenities.

For many individuals who have worked so hard on this project, Providence Park is an opportunity to live out their faith values.

“Catholics have numerous opportunities to live out their faith by serving both Divine Mercy Health Center and Providence Park with their time, talent and treasure,” Wilbur said. “Both ministries will continue to need volunteers. Both need community leaders to provide connections to resources to help those in need. And both can serve even more with ongoing financial support for those willing and able to give.”

“St. Lousie de Marillac ... she's the patron saint of social work in the Catholic Church, but her work extends beyond ...” Davis said. “... She's my inspiration on hard days and an inspiration to many around the world in service to others. May you find yourself in others, too, regardless of your faith or even lack of it. I know I did, and it allowed me to continue to serve in my role as the first community outreach director at CHI St. Vincent.”

For Stanger, Providence Park has been God’s way of moving mountains in her life.

“Sometimes, if you can't find what you're looking for, you just have to build it,” she said. “I never said when I was a little girl, ‘I’m going to grow up, and I'm going build a homeless village.’ God just had a different plan. ... I still have to pinch myself — this is actually happening. I'm just tickled that here I am. I pray every day that I can be God's hands and feet for those around me. What an incredible blessing.”