

New Jersey



Opinion

A STAR-LEDGER Q&A STEVE SCHNEIDER, FOUNDER, HOMES 4 THE HOMELESS

A new refuge for New Jersey's homeless: Shipping containers

It's a trick more commonly associated with human smugglers, but putting people in shipping containers is also a trend in the tiny house movement – and now, an innovative approach to combatting homelessness in Newark.

Mayor Ras Baraka just unveiled seven retrofitted containers to house up to 24 people for a 90-day pilot program. Set up on a vacant lot, they feature 20 cheerfully decorated, dorm-style rooms with bunk beds. There are also separate showers.

The designer is Steve Schneider, of the California-based nonprofit [Homes 4 the Homeless](#), who has a background in manufacturing electric vehicles, a fascination with tiny home living, and some experience with homelessness himself, he told Star-Ledger Editorial Board Member Julie O'Connor. Below is an edited transcript.

Q. You say tiny houses were your inspiration. Have you lived in one yourself?

I found myself homeless twice in my life, both by fires. When I was a child, we lost everything, and I had to live in a camper for two years while we were rebuilding. It was very tight quarters, smaller than the shelters that we provide. And I lost my own home in the wildfires in California back in 2017. I went from a 4,000 square foot house to a hotel room,



Steve Schneider, Founder and CEO of Homes 4 the Homeless.

then a tiny house of about 300 square feet for a couple years. It's been a reduction. I had a lot of stuff I accumulated from traveling all over the world. There's a certain liberating feeling when you finally get rid of that stuff, and you really don't need a lot of space. When you don't have a lot of material possessions, space is irrelevant, and you just want to be comfortable.

Q. Did you come up with this idea while living in a tiny house?

I actually came up with it during the 18 months I spent in a hotel, when I was trying to restart life again. During that time, right

outside my window, was this massive amount of homelessness. I had the flu and I was in bed, and it was pouring rain and cold. I kept thinking, 'If I felt the way I feel now and I was out there, I would probably die.' In that moment, the light bulb clicked: Wait a minute, these containers could be a great solution for this problem, and it could be done at a large scale.

Q. Why shipping containers?

I've been traveling overseas quite a bit because in my former life, I was a designer and manufacturer of electric vehicles. I was fascinated that, especially in China, they're housing millions of people using this type of structure. They're building Marriott and Travelodge hotels, big things out of these containers. You wouldn't even know they're shipping containers.

I went to this factory, which turned out to be the largest in the world, and watched what they were doing with these containers – not only cost effectively, but also safely and rapidly. They were able to produce really phenomenal housing. And it can be set up in a week. Modularization creates amazing efficiency. Sixteen shipping containers can be stacked on top of each other without any structural engineering because they're built so perfectly. Their modularization is a great reason for people to use them as building blocks for residential housing.

More and more people are using these for tiny home living, which is a big movement now. Tiny home living and modularization containers have been synonymous. These people are a demographic with the best stats: the best credit scores, the lowest amount of stress. Now we're trying to use the same housing for the people who have the worst misfortunes in life.

Q. How did you get in touch with the mayor of Newark?

Bloomberg Associates reached out to us. We wanted to do a layout to create scale and numbers. Bloomberg had done research on this, so they put us in touch with the city. We have also been in communication with the Lieutenant Governor and others who want to replicate this.

Q. You say that as temporary shelters, shipping containers have quite a few benefits.

We can set up a village like we did in Newark, and when people find permanent residences or a property is no longer available, rapidly move the shipping containers to a new location. They are so durable, so you're not sacrificing anybody's safety or wellbeing. It can go on for years this way, whereas you have to redo other temporary shelters all the time. We're not only trying to build these for chronic homelessness, but also for disaster relief victims. We did this village in Newark in under 60 days. In the full compliance world – meeting all federal, state, and city standards, all the codes – it's absolutely a miracle. And it costs roughly \$10,000 per bed. We're talking about fully compliant units fit for permanent residency. If you put it in those words, there's nothing cheaper that I know of.

Shipping containers aren't a new idea. They were used in the UK, for example, but they had a lot of bad press because people were like, 'I don't want to be in a container like storage.' What we did that was new was bring these containers to full compliance, instead of just working under an exemption. Really making them legal housing changed the feel of the structure, instead of just taking a container off a boat and putting people in it.



Q. How do you talk people through that skepticism?

Space is space, and it's what you make of it. It's really how you design the space. At the end of the day, it's how people feel when they're sitting inside. Do they feel good? Or do they feel like they're in a prison cell?

Q. Are these containers safe? What did you put in to make them habitable?

Everything has been built to standards that the feds adopted – the container itself has to start out that way. Then we take the bones of that container and make it comply with current residential housing standards for insulation, wiring, fire safety, alarm systems with strobe lights for the hearing impaired, a connection with 911, and insulation. Steel is the strongest material you could use. And each unit has heating and air conditioning, so everyone's going to be very comfortable. Each door is double locked.

Q. You say this is for people who might normally sleep at the bus terminal or train station; that it fills a different need than a regular shelter.

A lot of people that are homeless, they choose not to go into shelters because of the common area. They don't have any privacy for themselves. Shipping containers give people their own space, so when you go out and try to look for a job, you have the common things we take for granted, like knowing your stuff is going to be there when you get back and nobody's going to bother you. COVID has added another layer: Common area shelters are superspreader events for the homeless. So creating an environment where everyone can have their own space, not only during freezing cold weather, but during COVID was also a critical factor.

Q. These people will get same type of services as those in a regular homeless shelter?

Yes. Mental health care, help with job placement, anything that any other shelter would provide. The city now owns the structure and will handle the maintenance. And they have United Community Corporation, which operates traditional shelters, managing the guests who are there, making sure they're fed and their needs are being met.

Q. Why do you think other cities haven't yet adopted this strategy?

It's sometimes the thought process of wanting to make things too complicated. Complication creates red tape, delays, and opposition. We tried to just simplify it.

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