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## Worried about her homeless friends, Seattle area woman built housing project out of noodles

By [JOSHUA MCNICHOLS \(/PEOPLE/JOSHUA-MCNICHOLS\)](#) • 19 HOURS AGO

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*Sharon Jones built a housing project out of noodles*

KUOW PHOTO/JOSHUA MCNICHOLS



Seattle is working on a strategic response to homelessness. But the endless meetings and the conversations at the City Council – they can make solutions seem so far away.

But there are people closer to the street who have ideas of their own about what would work.



## Listen

4:17

Sharon Jones was tired of hearing people talk about ending homelessness. At her kitchen table in Federal Way, Jones realized: She had knowledge to share.

"They just piss me off. And so I come here, sit down, and think about what I can do," Jones said.

She pulled out a bag of elbow macaroni and a bottle of superglue and went to work.

"I got them noodles out of that kitchen, I said "I'm gonna build these people something they ain't never seen before in their lives," she said.

A few days later, she had finished a macaroni model of a housing project. It had one 1,238 rooms.

To understand why Jones spent several days on this noodle project, you have to understand a little about her past.



*Sharon Jones dreams of turning her macaroni model into a reality for her homeless friends.*

CREDIT KUOW PHOTO/JOSHUA MCNICHOLS

The story starts in a Washington, D.C. jail cell. Jones was going through withdrawal from heroin and coke. It was bad.

"I never want to get that again in my life. Not ever. I had to get out of D.C. Everybody in D.C. died," she said.

Jones came to Seattle in order to save her life. And she found comfort and friendship among Seattle's homeless population.

She had an apartment in Seatac and later in Federal Way. But they were far away from her friends and services. So sometimes she slept in Seattle under bridges or in shelters.

Her homeless friends were kind to her and helped keep her off drugs. And she was kind to them in return.

"I brought them here to my house; gave them baths, let them sleep," she said.

A similar sense of generosity informs her macaroni model. She walks me through some of the finer details, the amenities she envisions: "Phone jacks in every room. Mailbox station in each building. Nurses station, laundry room in each building. They don't got to worry about washing no clothes."

There are counselors and a library. And most importantly: Everybody would have their own room.

"Once you get them people in a place, I'm telling you, you don't know what a change. Everything," Jones said. "They're a human being again."



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*Back in D.C., Sharon Jones used to inject heroin mixed with coke. Today, tattoos cover the track marks she considers part of her distant past.*

CREDIT KUOW PHOTO/JOSHUA MCNICHOLS

I played excerpts from Jones' interview for Barbara Poppe over the phone. "Her testimony is very powerful," Poppe said.

Poppe was Barack Obama's homeless tsar from 2009 to 2014 and is now advising the city of Seattle on its homeless policy.

"That provision of a safe secure place to call your own really does propel folks forward to really be able to much better take care of themselves," she said.

She said study after study proves the "housing first" strategy works. If you put people in apartments first and tie in support services, then a lot of the other problems fade away. It's more effective and it's cheaper than responding to the emergencies people face when they're living on the street.

"I know a lot of people are really skeptical about this, because they see folks as living outdoors, and they think of them as incapable of living in their own apartment," Poppe said. "But the reality is, that is just so far from the truth."

Seattle is already doing some of these techniques. The Downtown Emergency Services Center, for example, has pioneered low-barrier housing projects, housing where you don't have to be sober to qualify.

It's a strategy that's been copied around the country, but Poppe said the city needs to be more systematic. We need to get the whole system of service providers to reduce barriers to housing.

Barbara Poppe will bring her recommendations back to Seattle in late summer.



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As Jones describes the amenities inside, she paints a picture of the complications of homeless life. For example, phones in each room are hardwired to tenants' doctors' offices. Easy-to-navigate-lobbies make it simple for emergency responders to reach ailing tenants.

CREDIT KUOW PHOTO/JOSHUA MCNICHOLS

Sharon Jones isn't waiting for the city to figure out homelessness. She's trying to save a little money to help turn her macaroni model into a real building.

She imagines herself on opening day. She would stand there by the door.

"And then watch them as they get in there. It's gonna change lives, man," Jones said. "Maybe even take them off them drugs -- you never know. It worked for me! It'd work for anybody."

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