



Faith-based organizations across California are transforming unused land into affordable housing, thanks in part to recent state legislation that streamlines the development process. Photo courtesy of Grace Presbyterian Church.

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Housing in God's backyard picks up as cities seek new ways to close the affordable housing gap

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In 2021, two nonprofits pitched Mark Burnham an idea: Grace Presbyterian Church should repurpose some of its underutilized land for affordable housing.

Burnham, the church's pastor, was intrigued. Like many churches across the United States, the number of worshippers at Grace has dropped over the last few decades, leaving empty swaths of parking lots and other underutilized land. The church was committed to helping those in need in Walnut Creek, but it assumed creating affordable housing was beyond its reach.

“We knew we couldn’t do it ourselves, as we don’t know how to build houses or run supportive services, so that letter made us realize there was something impactful we could do to help the unhoused in our community,” Burnham said.

Burnham responded, and the project quickly accelerated with the help of Hope Solutions, a local affordable housing nonprofit that works with faith communities to increase housing. This spring, the six-unit Hope Village welcomed its first tenants.

Hope Solutions served as the point organization on the project, convening the partners, raising the financing, managing the property, and providing supportive services. It is the first affordable housing modular community built on faith-based land in Contra Costa County and the first tiny home project in the city, according to Walnut Creek Community Development Director Erika Vandenbrande.

“It’s a gem within our community,” said Vandenbrande. “It took a village to create this village. We hope this is the start of something big, in Walnut Creek and statewide!”

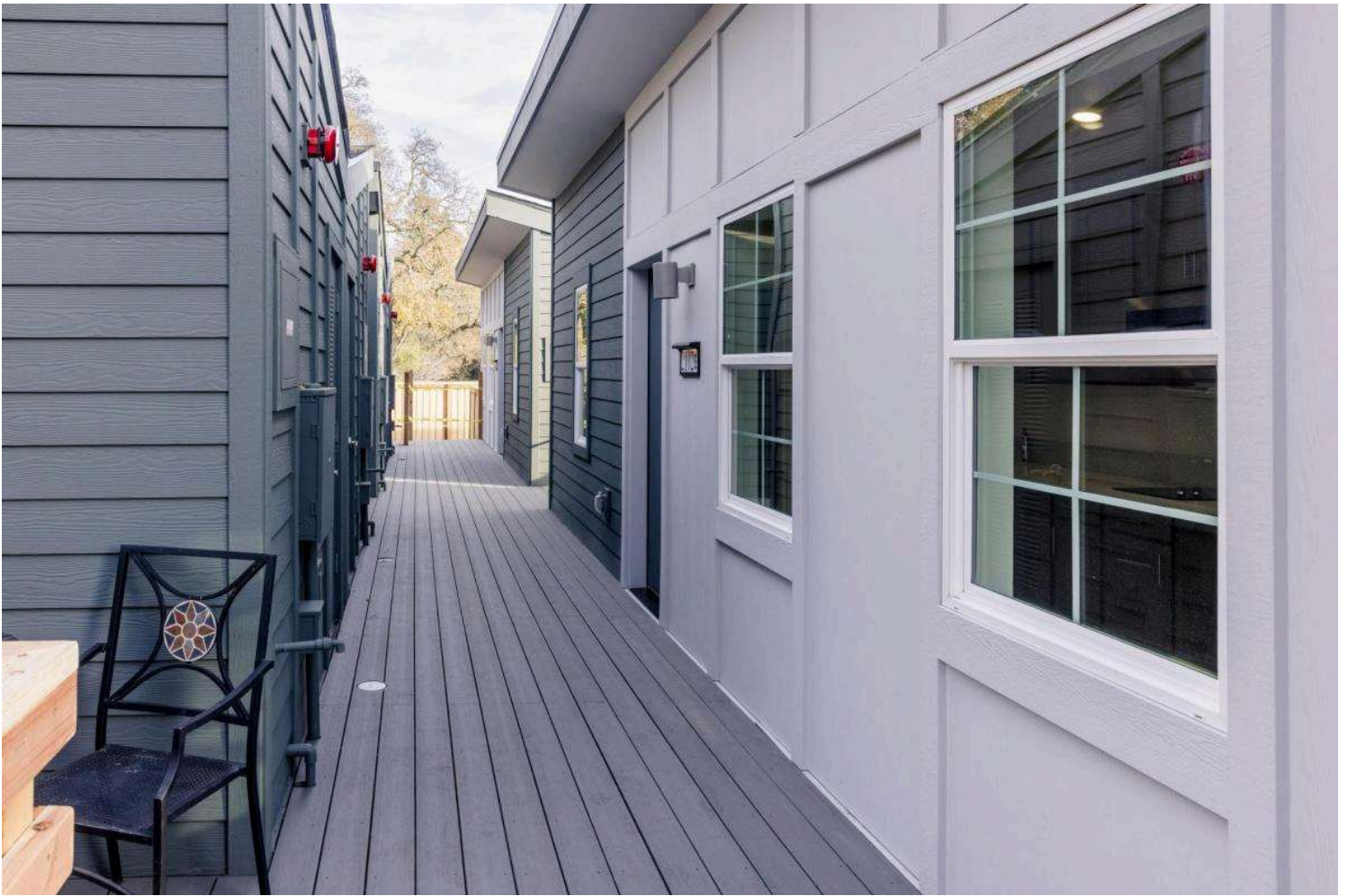
Advocates say Hope Village and similar developments were made possible in part by two state laws. [AB 2162 \(Chiu, 2018\)](#) allows supportive housing in residential neighborhoods and streamlines the approval process for housing projects that provide supportive services. [SB 4 \(Wiener, 2023\)](#) simplifies the approval process for religious organizations and nonprofit colleges that want to build affordable housing on their properties.

“By leveraging these two bills, Walnut Creek demonstrated a real interest in finding ways to bring in housing and supportive services for a very vulnerable population,” says Jasmine Tarkoff, a consultant on strategic initiatives at Hope Solutions.

Hope Village was the nonprofit’s first faith-based affordable housing project. It has two more in the pipeline in Contra Costa County. The project moved from idea to ribbon-cutting in less than three years and came in a million dollars under budget thanks to in-kind donations from the builder and Community Development Block Grant funds from Walnut Creek.



City leaders, nonprofit partners, and church members celebrating the opening of Hope Village — a collaborative effort to house the community’s most vulnerable residents. Photo courtesy of Grace Presbyterian Church.



Hope Village in Walnut Creek is the first modular affordable housing project on faith-based land in Contra Costa County. Photo courtesy of Grace Presbyterian Church.

“When I was unhoused, he housed me”

Hope Village is part of a trend slowly gaining steam across the state. In 2020, the Turner Center for Housing Innovation released a report that identified over 47,000 acres of potentially developable land owned by faith-based organizations (FBOs) in California and explored how organizations could use that land to create affordable housing. Then in 2024, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development produced a report detailing how grantees can work with churches, mosques, and synagogues to develop housing.

“The nexus between permanent supportive housing and faith-based groups engagement has increased significantly as the need for such housing continues to grow and grow,” says Helen Dunlap, a former HUD senior official and president of the National Low Income Housing Coalition.

As pressure ramps up on cities to produce more housing, more cities and FBOs are coming together to explore opportunities. But despite the growing interest, these partnerships face serious roadblocks.

“When SB 4 passed, there was the expectation that the floodgates would open and a lot of groups would be interested in developing affordable housing on their land,” says Dunlap. “But that has not happened. First, having permission to do something doesn’t pay for it. The cost of development in California is higher than other states, and the process is lengthy, which drives up the cost even more.”

FBOs often lack the expertise needed to develop housing or obtain grant funding. Faith leaders must also work within the hierarchy of their denominations, which can add additional layers of approval and outreach.

Dunlop says that oftentimes, FBO housing works best for black churches, which have a long history of providing low-income housing. Plus, they have a national structure they can turn to for advice and support, and in some cases, loans.

One such project is Bethel One in San Diego, the first such development in the city. The Bethel AME church teamed with YIGBY®, a nonprofit founded in 2017 to build housing on faith-based organizations' properties. YIGBY® (short for "Yes in God's Backyard") provides FBOs with low-cost technical assistance, access to funding, and support with the policy and entitlement process. For the Bethel project, YIGBY® is providing financing solutions and construction management oversight.



The Bethel AME Church envisions Bethel One as a place for low-income seniors and homeless veterans in the heart of San Diego. Photo courtesy of Yes in God's Backyard®.

Mary Lydon, the founding lead project consultant for YIGBY®, says the organization was formed to offer the expertise and access to capital FBOs lacked.

"We thought we could help them with their initial discovery about what they had, and if their land was viable for affordable housing," she says. "We developed a team of consultants who provide no-cost or low-cost services to help churches, synagogues, and mosques."

Bethel One came about in 2019 when Pastor Harvey Vaughn III heard an *NPR* report about the affordable housing shortage in San Diego. That same day, he called a meeting of the church board. They enthusiastically agreed to explore how the 137-year-old church could do its part to house veterans and active-duty military, who make up a substantial proportion of the congregation.

Vaughn says that the board and congregation were immediately on board because serving the unhoused was at the core of the church's mission.

"I like to use the scripture, 'When I was hungry, he fed me. When I was naked, he clothed me,'" Vaughn says. "I add, 'When I was unhoused, he housed me.'"

The 26-unit project for low-income seniors and formerly homeless veterans **broke ground in 2024** and is slated for completion this August. The \$7.65 million project received significant support from the city, including reduced development impact fees through its Complete Communities program. Lydon says SB 4, along with wide support from community and civic organizations, also played a role in helping the project move forward.

The church will operate the housing development, teaming with the Veterans Administration and the nonprofit Brilliant Corners, who will provide supportive services to help homeless veterans transition into stable, permanent housing.

According to YIGBY®, San Diego has over 4,600 acres of church property **that can be used for housing**. Its goal is to support 3 projects per year, working in partnership with impact investors and faith-based lenders. Currently, two other projects are in the pipeline.

“We much rather house people than cars”

One hundred and thirty miles north in West Los Angeles, the Jewish congregation IKAR is pioneering another way of marrying its mission of social justice with land use. Currently, the synagogue rents space for its services and gatherings, but is in the process of redeveloping a property purchased in 2020. From the earliest stages of planning, IKAR included 60 to 70 units of permanent supportive housing for formerly homeless seniors. The project is still in the early stages of development.

“When we were founded 20 years ago, a commitment to social justice was integral to our mission,” says IKAR founder and CEO Melissa Balaban. “When we were planning our new home, we asked ourselves, ‘In addition to providing a beautiful and inspiring space for our community, how do we incorporate our values and mission, helping to narrow the chasm between the world as it is and the world as it should be?’”

Like many other faith-based organizations, IKAR is providing the land and teaming with a housing developer who will raise the funding. Since the property is on a major transit corridor and earmarked for affordable housing development, the city eased some requirements, including reducing the number of required parking spaces. “We would much rather house people than cars,” Balaban says.

IKAR is just one such development in the city. The Catholic Church is developing [74 units of affordable housing](#) on the archdiocese’s land near Los Angeles City College.

Balaban credits the support of the city of Los Angeles for making this project possible.

“Mayor Karen Bass has been incredibly supportive, as has Katy Yaroslavsky, our city council member, in helping us navigate all the various complexities of building affordable housing,” Balaban says. “Everybody is on the same page, wanting desperately to build more housing in this city.”

The driving forces behind the Walnut Creek, San Diego, and Los Angeles projects all say they hope their projects will spur other cities across the state to explore similar opportunities.

“Our greatest hope is that the impact of what we are doing isn’t just the 70 or so units we will build,” says Balaban. “I have this fantasy that if every church, mosque, and synagogue that has some extra space built five, ten, even 100 units of housing in their cities, we could literally solve the affordable housing crisis.”