

KTVL Medford, Oregon

Unwanted land titles could put an end to homelessness in Jackson County

by Megan Willgoos

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Tiny homes in Hope Village on McAndrews Road in Medford. Non-profit Rogue Retreat is working to create more villages but said finding land is difficult. (KTVL/Megan Willgoos)



MEDFORD, Ore. — Non-profit organization Rogue Retreat is working to overcome homelessness in Southern Oregon one project at a time. Yet, one major hurdle that stands in the way of making this happen is finding the land to do so.

"We need to continue looking for spaces [like the Urban Campground](#) where we can organize and tell people that this is where you can go to and then we can provide wraparound support to those individuals there," Rogue Retreat Development Director Matthew Vorderstrasse said. "We just need to identify the space and the community that it can be placed into and iron out the details as we go forward. But really, just having that large piece of land at this point is kind of the biggest barrier."

Eagle Point resident Andrea Jansen became a Rogue Retreat Steering Committee member after returning from a similar project in Austin, Texas, in 2019. The Community First project is a village home to 250 people that sits on 25 acres of land with access to all the necessities plus a community center, bus stop, and an arts and crafts center.

"We (Jackson County) could do that here as long as we find that land," Jansen said. "There's got to be someone out there who, for instance, doesn't have anyone to leave their land that could donate it to a cause like Rogue Retreat."

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The [non-profit has five housing and shelter programs](#) that meet people at their basic needs and de-escalate them out of any crisis they may be experiencing. Vorderstrasse said once they do this, they can get them back from a survival mentality into a community-minded mentality.

"I worked as a work camper, which means that I exchanged my talents as an artist for a free place to park my RV and one month turned into nine," Jansen said. "It was such an eye-opening experience for me. It just transformed me completely, and when I returned here to Eagle Point, I volunteered to work here at Hope Village."

Jansen brought her artistic talents into Hope Village and painted five murals inside its visitor center. Vorderstrasse said she did a lot more than bring her paintbrush to the table, though.

"We were really privileged to be able to bring her (Jansen) into the whole village project and help kind of advise us as we go forward," Vorderstrasse said.

"Ultimately, what we know that we want to do here in Southern Oregon is we want

to create a community much like Community First Village, where we can create that that master plan community that can be people's forever homes that they need to be."

Medford City Council passed a new [prohibited camping ordinance](#) on April 1 that bans tents in the city all year round and camping on Bear Creek Greenway during fire season. Volderstrasse said Rogue Retreat stands neutral on this ordinance but thinks the city does need to start looking at places for the homeless to go.

"Our standpoint is if we are going to prohibit people from being in a certain area, then we need to continue finding spaces for them to be," Volderstrasse said. "I would just love to see a community that really embraces alternative housing solutions and then also comes together to work on the bigger issue, which is getting more affordable housing built. I would love for Southern Oregon to become kind of the measure for success, for how to overcome homelessness in your community and build people back up."

Rogue Retreat is working to build more tiny home villages, such as their newest 12-unit village called Heart Village. Jansen said this is a step in the right direction to solving the homelessness problem in Jackson County, but more could be done.

"I think the government should step up to the plate here and buy some of these old properties or old RV parks or old properties that are abandoned," Jansen said. "All they really need to do is throw down some concrete slabs, put in some utilities, and start charging rent. I exist on Social Security, and I would be much happier just to go ahead and give my rent back to the government rather than to some slumlord."

On top of finding land and money to help solve the homelessness crisis, Jansen said the smallest of gestures could turn a homeless resident's life around. If you see a homeless person on the street, she said to show empathy and wave at them instead of ignoring them.

"That's the hardest thing for someone who's down and out is to feel that they're ignored and have absolutely no value in society," Jansen said. "And so I think that as a group, if we can look at the homeless with more compassion, then it would just inevitably lead to housing solutions for the people on the streets."

During Jansen's nine months in Texas, she was interviewed for a documentary called "Community First, A Home for the Homeless." The documentary will air for the first time on the PBS World Channel in Medford on channels KFTS World and KSYS World April 6 at 4 p.m. Jansen said the film represents all of what projects like Rogue Retreat and Community First can achieve.

"It takes more than four walls and a roof to solve homelessness," Jansen said. "It's a community effort. You know, when they say it takes a village, it really does."