



SLEEP WELL

All photos courtesy of Everett Gospel Mission



Innovative design brings peaceful rest to shelter guests

by John Hull

You and I know how important a good night's sleep is. I make better decisions and am more productive when I've rested well the night before. But think about the sleep areas in most shelters—they're noisy, uncomfortable, and offer no privacy. We're creating environments where people aren't getting good sleep, and then we're asking them to make better, less self-destructive decisions. Those are counter-productive goals. We need to make sure they can get good sleep in order to make healthy decisions. ▶



At Everett Gospel Mission, our goal was to improve our guests' abilities to rest and recharge while showing God's love, and we accomplished that goal even better than I'd dreamed.

Several catalysts pushed us to start rethinking our sleeping accommodations. I was in my last few weeks of being the director of the men's shelter. A man in one of our beds had a job; his bunkmate didn't work, but he did have Restless Leg Syndrome. Bunk beds are notorious for not stifling movement, and the working man got upset. They ended up getting into a physical altercation over it.

We also had too many people who simply couldn't get into an upper bunk, so we had empty beds. We had 66 beds, but we would average only having 40 to 45 of them full because not enough people could get up and down on a top bunk, so we didn't have good full occupancy.

The other factor at play was that our mayor created a task force in 2015 to study crime and other issues on the city's streets—but nobody talked to the people who lived on the streets. So we created a focus group and invited people to our shelter for a meal. We talked for several hours about what keeps them from coming to our shelter.

We heard things like, *I don't feel like my stuff is secure...I need a place to charge my phone...I don't have any privacy...I need room to breathe.* At the time, we used an emergency-shelter format—mats on the floor that were 20 inches apart—to house as many

people as possible. But our helping was actually hurting. By housing so many people, we were hiding the crisis from our community. So we were allowing our community to not invest what it needed to in order to provide dignified, humane solutions. We decided we're not going to do that anymore and began asking, *Could we do it differently and still get as many folks in off the streets?*

There must be a better way

I moved into the director of strategic initiatives position, with the specific purpose of finding property and building a new building. Our team traveled around the country, visiting 15 cities and 25 different shelters. We saw a lot facilities facing the same challenges that we had. But we didn't see enough innovation.

Around the same time, I was doing a home remodeling project, hoping to build a bunk room for my six kids. I started researching bunk beds and found some that had stairs to go up and down. So the team began brainstorming how we could have durable beds with stairs instead of ladders.

We put together a design team that included a project engineer, a boat designer from our board, and a former NASA engineer. The stairs had to be movable but secure; electrical needed to be run through it; we needed to be able to spray for bedbugs. Every bed needed to give the exact same space to every person. The beds needed to have stairs and a handrail.

We want to change the way that shelters provide beds to individuals. It's not a for-profit venture; it's a change venture.



The cubbies actually took the longest to figure out, but they're a critical part of the design. They have electricity so people can store and charge their phones, and it's specifically put by the head of the bed. We worked on it for a year and a half. In the end, we literally designed a building around those beds. Lockers are built into the bedframe so people can store their belongings safely but still have them nearby. We added walls and a built-in charging station for each guest to know they are in a safe, restful place here at EGM.

The beds are made with pre-sealed furniture-grade wood. All seams are sealed and caulked. We do monthly maintenance of spraying for bedbugs and haven't had an outbreak since. The beds are even COVID-19 compliant, as the aisle keeps people six feet apart. ▶



Effortless fundraising

To fund the project, we began a campaign called Neighbors Care. I wanted a 3D print of the beds to show potential donors, but it was really expensive to get one made. At the time I didn't know the value of a 3D print and how much money I would be able to raise from that little model! I was talking to my neighbor about it, and he said he'd make me one on his 3D printer.

We held an event with about 60 of our major donors and did a brainstorming session with them. We brought in our very best bunk bed from the women and children's shelter and made it look as nice as possible. Then we asked them to talk to us about what they see. Everyone highlighted the positives.

Then we asked them to imagine that they were homeless, and this was where they had to sleep at a shelter. They thought it was okay—until they were told no bottom bunks were available. Given that major donors tend to be older folks, they said they wouldn't do it because it was too hard to get up and down. So we asked what they



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would change. The things they came up with matched our bed design.

We passed the little model around, and we raised around \$100,000 that night without even asking for it! They saw why it was needed, and it was where they would want to sleep if they were homeless themselves. It's easy to fundraise for these beds because it's a systemic change, not just a Band-Aid change. Donors are excited to fund [these bed designs] because they say, "You're innovative, you're loving, and you're doing something we're proud to support."

Smiles all around

One of the things that's really neat is the volunteer opportunity to put a bed together. It's like the biggest Ikea furniture party ever, and they have a great time! It's unlike any other bed in any shelter in the world, and it creates a safer and more dignified living environment for our neighbors coming off the streets.

Our CEO, Sylvia Anderson, said these beds are a dream come true because "It's been a long time in the making and a long time of thinking about what really helps someone in an emergency shelter. And this bed represents us hearing what they need and adapting what we were doing."

I'm so excited about the beds, and the response from our guests has been amazing! One guest said, "As soon as I came into the shelter, I was introduced to these beds and this space that it allows you to have. They have privacy.



John is the director of strategic initiatives at Everett Gospel Mission in Everett, Washington. He first joined EGM in 2006 as the director of development. In 2011 he made the move into direct services as the director of EGM's men's shelter and day center, where he gained frontline insight into the challenges faced by those experiencing homelessness. In 2016, he moved into the new role of director of strategic initiatives. John can be reached at jhull@egmission.org.

I love the fact that we have these little cubby holes where you can charge your phone with the USB ports and the electric outlet.”

Another guest shared, “I like the fact that we can do a little reading before we go to sleep. And I can actually be comfortable in bed. It's long enough for my legs to comfortably lay down and sleep.”

We have licensed a manufacturer to make these beds for us, and maybe other shelters will consider using them. If we never made a dollar on this, we'd be okay with that, if we could just get more beds like this in more shelters. We want to change the way that shelters provide beds to individuals. It's not a for-profit venture; it's a change venture.

The beds' size does reduce the number of beds we can fit by a little bit; however, we're not serving fewer people. We have fewer beds, but we have 100 percent occupancy because everyone can get up and down the beds, and we have 100 percent occupancy of people who feel safer in a more dignified, private space so they can rest more.

It's always fun to tell individuals coming into the shelter for the first time, “*This is here because this community loves you, and you're worth it to us.*” And so part of the story of the bed is being able to reiterate that message that we knew we could do better; being able to do better with a different kind of service and different kind of bed that says you're worth it to us to do better than we did yesterday. ◀

