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OurCalling raising \$50M to build tiny-home community for homeless North Texans

CEO Wayne Walker aims to create family for those who have none with a permanent supportive housing project



OurCalling founder Pastor Wayne Walker (left) and chief advancement officer Patrick Palmer pose before a tiny model house at OurCommunity, which is under construction in rural Ellis County, Texas, March 25, 2022. OurCalling -- a faith-based, nonprofit service provider for people experiencing homelessness in Dallas -- is building a village for the area's most needy who have complex medical needs and need permanent supportive housing. Named OurCommunity, the village of tiny homes and support services will span hundreds of acres in unincorporated Ellis County, about 20 miles south of downtown Dallas. (Tom Fox / Staff Photographer)

By Leah Waters

Wayne Walker felt tired but at peace as he gripped the hand of the 69-year-old man resting in a hospice bed. John “Smitty” Williams lay dying of congestive heart failure. If it weren’t for Wayne, he’d be all alone.

As Smitty gasped for air, Wayne read a Psalm. Wayne is a pastor and the CEO at OurCalling in Dallas. He often reads Psalms to people as they take their last breaths. Smitty was different. For more than 10 years, Wayne and Smitty had been the closest of friends.

Wayne had watched as Smitty confronted his declining health with terror. Smitty lived in permanent supportive housing, which is designed to help people with a disabling condition who are experiencing homelessness with indefinite rent and support services. That means he had a roof over his head, bus passes and visits with a case manager.

But Smitty couldn’t dress himself and had trouble getting up and down to use the restroom. Wayne would visit Smitty’s apartment and find him covered in his own waste, having not eaten in days.

In the fall of 2021, Wayne could do little except drive his friend to the hospital. One place refused to give Smitty anything more than ice chips. Wayne called in a favor and got him a bed at Faith Presbyterian Hospice in Dallas.

Near the end, Smitty screamed at Wayne, begging to go home. “I’m scared,” Smitty said. “Just promise me you won’t leave.”

For Wayne, it is the greatest of wrongs for anyone to live, and die, without dignity. But the sad reality is many like Smitty will meet an undignified death.

In this gap, Wayne found his calling: He would be family to people who had none.

One potential solution

In the past decade that Wayne has helped people like Smitty, the data-obsessed CEO and his team discovered a critical problem that no one in Texas has solved: where to put people who have the most complex needs.

Permanent supportive housing, although an important solution to homelessness, wasn't designed for people like Smitty. His complex health conditions meant he needed care that isn't normally funded by housing programs. Without housing and continued health support, people get sicker and die sooner, Wayne knows.

He decided he had to build a solution that took care of people's housing and health needs, all in one place, until the day they died.

Hundreds of people in Dallas with a disabling condition that need attentive care and lack the means to pay for it often find there is simply nowhere for them to live — or die.

OurCalling, which has been a provider of services only, is fundraising for the largest capital investment of housing for people experiencing homelessness in North Texas. The \$50 million project will add 500 homes for people without them.

A project years in the making, OurCommunity will create a tiny-home village with all support services on site, tackling the hurdle of transportation.

The village will feature about 60,000 square feet of buildings: a full medical clinic, mental health professionals, a pharmacy, a kitchen and cafeteria, coffee shop, library, even a chapel. Every service OurCalling currently provides at its South Dallas location will be in OurCommunity.

Wayne and his team spent years researching more than 40 tiny-home communities across the country. They've yet to find any with the level of support services OurCommunity intends to provide.

OurCommunity is poised to be a solution to a costly and complex problem that has burdened Dallas for decades. But it's not without criticism and a fair share of challenges. The greatest point of conflict is where to build it.

Wayne's answer: Not in Dallas.

Solving problems, serving God

When Wayne was a boy and he needed money, he bought a jumbo-size bag of candy at the store and sold pieces for a buck a piece to kids at school, pocketing the profit.

At 8, the young entrepreneur drew up plans for a roadside barbecue stand, detailing an intricate map of assembly lines, along with a projection of how much he'd need to invest to construct a small building.

As an adult, and as a software developer, he created assembly-line systems and built apps for companies. Wayne's mind works like a machine — he needs to input data about a problem. Then comes a vision for transforming a system into something efficient, scalable and good.

But he was tired of working on the next version of an app. As Wayne puts it, he wanted to work on the next version of a person.

He had experience with fixing broken people. When he was a teenager, Wayne struggled with depression and anxiety. He self-harmed, and tried to kill himself several times. He got into fights sometimes and also experienced secondary trauma from the revolving door of foster kids his parents brought into their home.

Then he went to college and found a place to begin healing. The church was a refuge for Wayne, a place where he found his calling. He wanted to build a supportive, faithful community for people without any.

So when Wayne gave up a six-figure salary and a job offer at Microsoft to minister to homeless people, he stumbled upon what appeared to be an enigma, even for a fixer like him. Why is it so hard for people to get off the streets? And why weren't more people helping them?

This was a problem he intended to help solve, as Wayne and his wife Carolyn Walker started OurCalling in 2009. They would be the help, adding to a crew of area nonprofits dedicated to this work.



Wayne Walker took his friend John "Smitty" Williams to the pharmacy in 2015 to fill a prescription. "It was always difficult to get him to go to the doctor and even a bigger challenge to get him to remember to take his meds," Walker said. Williams lived in permanent supportive housing but could not care for himself and often needed help. (Wayne Walker)



An exterior view of tiny house models at OurCommunity, which is under construction in rural Ellis County, Texas, March 25, 2022. OurCalling -- a faith-based, nonprofit service provider for people experiencing homelessness in Dallas -- is building a village for the area's most needy who have complex medical needs and need permanent supportive housing. Named OurCommunity, the village of tiny homes and support services will span hundreds of acres in unincorporated Ellis County, about 20 miles south of downtown Dallas. (Tom Fox)

By 2011, the couple raised money to hire three employees and lease a warehouse space on Haskell Avenue, where they served breakfast and lunch and let people use the one shower they had. A few years later, the 3,000-square-foot space was bursting with people in need, including Smitty, who had wandered in looking for food and some help.

In 2012, after Wayne and Carolyn opened their Haskell building, Dallas' population of people experiencing homelessness numbered more than 3,400 according to the county's point-in-time count, a survey required by the Department of Housing and Urban Development.

Five years later, the Walkers moved into their current property on Cesar Chavez in South Dallas. That year, the numbers swelled to nearly 4,000. Wayne knew the data was a gross underestimation of the problem.

In 2022, Dallas and Collin counties had 4,410 people experiencing homelessness, according to the HUD count. Wayne says that number is much closer to 10,000 individuals, which includes children experiencing housing insecurity, as well as families living in cars. About 74% of the people OurCalling serves are men and 9% are veterans. About 65% are Black.

Before the pandemic started, OurCalling would meet about 15 new people each week. Now, Wayne's team sees about 97 new people weekly.

Of those nearly 100 people on average, Wayne's data tells him about 50 will find a way out of homelessness themselves. These self-resolvers will make up with their spouse, find another job or couch surf with a friend for a month.

About 25 of those people will for a short time need a lot of help — rent money or a housing voucher, a food bank and some services. OurCalling can connect them with dozens of North Texas partners.

Then there's the last 25 or so: the city's most vulnerable who need complex care, likely for the rest of their lives. People who are aging, many with limited mobility, some with mental health needs and others who need hospice care. Too many people like Smitty, for whom permanent supportive housing is not enough.

Wayne has nowhere to send this group of people, several hundred a year, when OurCalling shuts its doors each night.

Death on the street

The air was cold but not quite freezing the morning Wayne found a man lying dead outside OurCalling's gates in South Dallas. The older man was not the first person Wayne had found dead over the years. Police have asked Wayne countless times to identify bodies found on the street.

Wayne estimates about five people experiencing homelessness die preventable or premature deaths each week in North Texas.

He has seen horrific things. Men and women left frozen on a sidewalk. The aftermath of stabbings, suicides, shootings, alcohol poisonings and overdoses, and one body set on fire on a mattress in the woods.

Some deaths were quiet with no apparent foul play but in people far too young to die of natural causes. Wayne knows that being homeless at 57 is like being 72 for those who have homes.

Even the trauma that Wayne experienced in his younger years couldn't have prepared him for the horror of seeing other people suffering. Now, the most powerful impact the deaths have had on Wayne is a sharp drive to prevent them. That's why he and his team planned OurCommunity.

This group of most needy also generally represent the greatest cost burden to the city — with police, ambulance services and medical care at Parkland responding to repeated calls for help.

These "super-utilizers" cost a community between \$40,000 and \$80,000 per year for each individual's reactive services, according to a 2016 report from the Dallas Commission on Homelessness.

They also take up spots in permanent supportive housing programs across the county that are not designed for their specific needs, which exhausts resources for other people. So designing a program to help the last 25%, Wayne believes, will actually help the other 75%.

With this population of people, Wayne discovered the greatest problem of all: Where does a city put people who need help for the rest of their lives but cannot work and earn income?

Sharp rebukes and criticism

Today, all the agencies that work with people experiencing homelessness in Dallas County know Wayne.

The leader of the green-shirt brigade is one of many partners tackling problems and helping people off the streets. Often, in meetings, in private conversations and on social media, he issues sharp rebukes of homeless response systems and lack of solutions in the city.



Executive Director of OurCalling Wayne Walker poses with a citation from the City of Dallas, a letter to the Dallas City Attorney and a letter from the City of Dallas, Tuesday, April, 12, in Dallas, Texas. OurCalling's search and rescue team builds relationships with homeless people to help them find a housing solution. ORG XMIT: 20057832A(Rebecca Slezak / Staff Photographer)

People experiencing homelessness in Dallas are disproportionately middle-aged

People ages 30-69 were overrepresented in the homeless population served by OurCalling, data from OurCalling shows. 79.7% of the homeless served by OurCalling belong to this age group, compared to 48.8% of the general population.

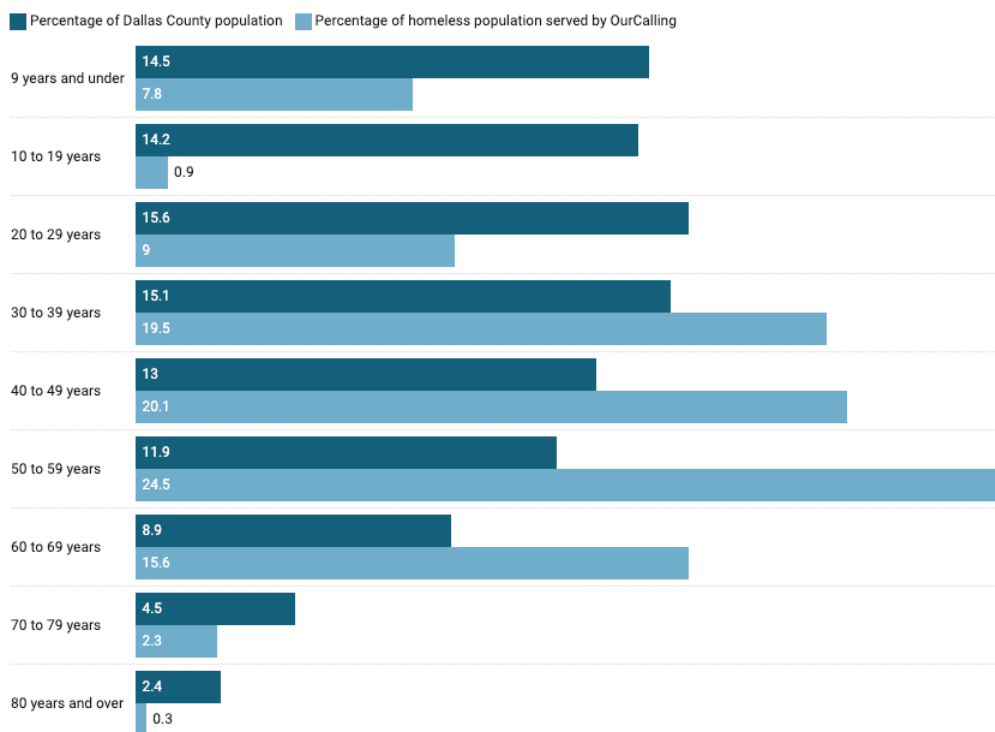


Chart: Dana Chiuieh • Source: U.S. Census Bureau and OurCalling • Created with Datawrapper

Men overrepresented in population of people experiencing homelessness in Dallas

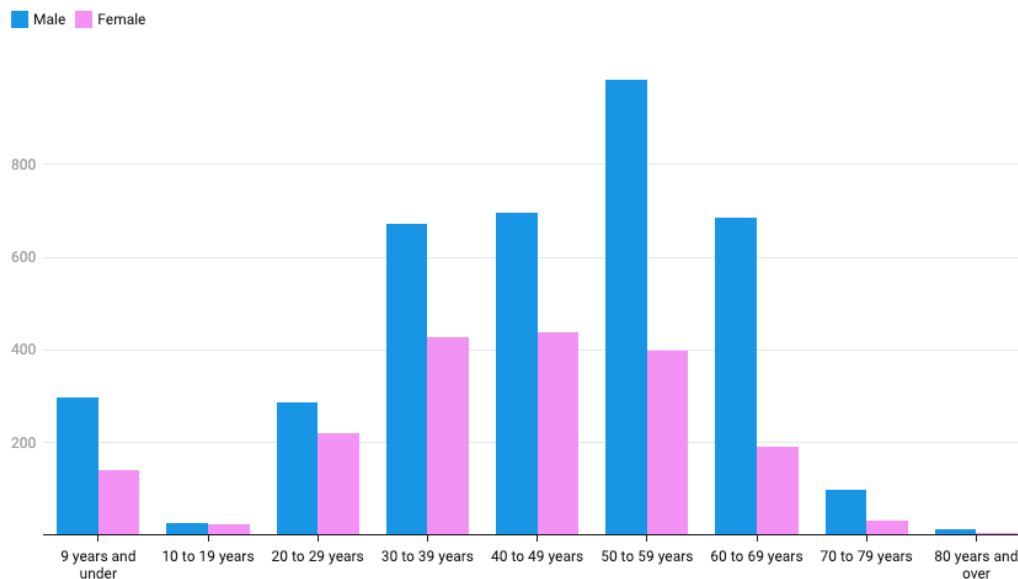


Chart: Dana Chiuieh • Source: OurCalling • Created with Datawrapper

Wayne once tweeted that “housing first is housing worst,” a criticism of the long-held notion that housing individuals is the first step in a solution. A friend wouldn’t speak to him for two years after that.

There hasn’t been a net gain of emergency shelter beds in North Texas in more than a decade, Wayne says. Dallas’ new panhandling penalties criminalize the poor, he argues. City Hall’s bureaucratic systems move too slow and not enough to tackle rapidly evolving problems.

Dallas’ most recent \$72 million commitment to place 2,700 people into apartments, though a laudable Band-Aid, does nothing to increase a chronically depleted housing supply.

And the way permanent supportive housing is defined helps a lot of people, but it falls short of providing all the services needed for the most complex cases.

Christine Crossley, the City of Dallas’ director of the Office of Homeless Solutions, says the city can’t do it all, either.

“The city doesn’t have all the money, nor should we be bearing the full cost of standing up all this housing,” she said. “So it’s about: How do we partner with private developers, with other agencies, to leverage the money we need for more results?”

But the wrong Wayne sees as the greatest threat against real solutions: a community that excludes.

Not-in-my-backyard,” or NIMBYism, is a powerful sentiment that fuels much of the political pushback at City Council and community meetings when discussing where to place affordable housing.

The verbal sparring too often ends with the can getting kicked down the road, stalling solutions in their tracks.

Nothing infuriates Wayne more than an inefficient system. The truth about Dallas’ homelessness crisis is so harsh that it hurts to hear it.

So when Wayne speaks, his sharp tongue cuts deep.

His wife Carolyn says he is also “the kindest, most honest, genuinely loving human being on this planet” that she knows. “He isn’t afraid of confrontation because he is more concerned about people than his reputation – 100% of the time, he is willing to put his reputation on the line... if it means the people and population that he cares about get their needs met.”

If the city and county can’t, Wayne will — with the backing of OurCalling’s army of private donors.

He found the perfect answer to skirt the systems in Dallas: Build a community that includes everyone in a place where no one can stop him.

That means not in Dallas.

After spending years searching a map of Dallas County for prime space for OurCommunity, Wayne scouted 280 acres of unincorporated pasture land in Ellis County that isn’t bound by a city council’s rule.

Except for clearance from the county, OurCalling has dominion over the land.

Crossley said that though she’s toured the site and is excited for any project that helps house people, that doesn’t mean Dallas isn’t supportive of any permanent supportive housing solution in Dallas County.

“There is a ton of political will for it,” she said. “It’s just figuring out how we partner to get it done.”

While Dallas pursues its own goals for permanent supportive housing, OurCalling is building it now – at an Ellis County location that’s 20 miles south of downtown Dallas.

Here, Wayne will build a city — a community — for people who have been excluded. Wayne believes that many people will move there because they will find peace, safety and a community they can trust.



OurCalling founder Pastor Wayne Walker (left) and chief advancement officer Patrick Palmer visit a small, secluded fishing lake at OurCommunity, which is under construction in rural Ellis County, Texas, March 25, 2022. OurCalling -- a faith-based, nonprofit service provider for people experiencing homelessness in Dallas -- is building a village for the area's most needy who have complex medical needs and need permanent supportive housing. Named OurCommunity, the village of tiny homes and support services will span hundreds of acres in unincorporated Ellis County, about 20 miles south of downtown Dallas.(Tom Fox / Staff Photographer)

The green land

Wayne looked out at the green land that was to be Smitty's final resting place and thought his friend might like it.

A month before OurCalling closed on the Ellis County property in September 2021, Smitty died.

In hospice, finally at peace, Smitty took his last breaths. Wayne whispered scripture in his ear. Smitty was cremated and his ashes placed in a cardboard box. Wayne keeps them in a closet in his office for now.

The man whom Wayne considered family would never see the place that would be his home.

The tiny-home community, once complete, will add 500 homes for many who once slept on the street. Residents will step outside their houses, sit on the porch or under the shade of pecan trees and watch ducks swim on the ponds, stocked with catfish.

Residents will pick tomatoes from a community garden, gather fresh eggs from chickens and smell honey made from hives that'll be housed on the acres of green space, where dozens of cattle can graze.

But the site will furnish the piece people have been missing: permanent help and a home, where they won't be kicked out at night, or ever, Wayne says.

This vision sounds almost too good to be true. Certainly too good to be replicable should anyone else want to copy this solution in Dallas County.

Just ask experts like Bobby Page, the owner and founding partner at JPI, one of Dallas' largest apartment developers. Page provided Wayne with advice on the Ellis County project. Getting past cities' planning and zoning commissions is often the biggest hurdle to any housing project, Page said. Building a development for the city's most needy and vulnerable is nearly impossible.

"There's a perception of additional crime or less maintenance or more government services, more traffic, more kids in school," Page said. "Those perceptions are generally not factually correct, but the facts aren't necessarily relevant when you get into NIMBYism."

Wayne believes this solution doesn't exist already because there's essentially no way to make money from it. Every penny of support will come through private donations, a trademark of the nonprofit's development strategy, one where investors never see a financial return.

Wayne wishes Smitty could have seen the land. The tall trees and cool water and quiet skies would have been a balm, Wayne knows. Now, the ground topped with wildflowers will be the final place of rest for Smitty's ashes.

Once the project breaks ground, Wayne will build a cemetery for residents, so people can know they will be cared for in death, as they will be in life.

Have questions about OurCommunity? Visit ourcalling.org/home or email ourcommunity@ourcalling.org.