

# Conestoga Hut Project Overview & Frequently Asked Questions



## What are Conestoga Huts?

Conestoga Huts, designed by Erik de Buhr of Community Supported Shelters and named for their resemblance to the Conestoga Wagons used by 19<sup>th</sup> century pioneers, are micro-shelters that serve as a dry, warm, safe place to sleep at night for those who would otherwise sleep outside. Huts feature a lockable door and window, a platform twin-size bed, 60 square feet of interior space, vents, a storage area, and 20 square feet of covered outdoor space. Conestoga Huts are inexpensive (\$2,500), portable, durable, and can easily be assembled, disassembled, and rebuilt if damaged.

Community Supported Shelters have used Conestoga Huts to establish 12 successful Safe Spot Communities in Lane County, Oregon. Those who were able to stay in Conestoga Huts rather than on the street or in tents reported that they experienced less hardship finding and keeping gainful employment and remaining in services.

## Why 5 North Congress? Is it safe?

Athens Mental Health Inc., dba The Gathering Place has been serving adults in our community with a lived experience of mental illness at our 7 North Congress Street location since 1976. AMH Inc. also operates Mike's Bridge House, a licensed Level II male sober living facility, next door at 34 West Washington Street. The Gathering Place and Mike's Bridge House surround the parking lot, a key piece of our wellness and recovery campus.

In our nearly 50-year history, we have not had an issue with the community being harmed by our programming. We provide programming and direct service resources every day of the year, including holidays. We have 15 security cameras, updated in 2025, placed throughout our campus to provide 24-hour surveillance. The parking lot is fenced and will be gated to prevent entry at night. The house manager of Mike's Bridge House will be present on the campus to provide oversight during nighttime hours.

## Who is providing the funding for this project?

This project will be funded primarily through a grant from Sisters Health Foundation. Contributions from community members and partners will also be utilized to sustain this program.



This Conestoga Hut was built in 2021 and has been in the parking lot at 5 North Congress since. The interior is a warm, dry, secure place to sleep and store important items.



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## Is there really a need for this project in Athens?

In Fiscal Year 2024, The Ohio Housing Finance Agency's Housing Needs Assessment found a critical affordable housing shortage – for every affordable and available housing unit, there are 2.5 extremely low income renters in need of a unit. Increased housing insecurity combined with housing shortages mean that more people are at increased risk of homelessness. Athens is no exception – the Athens County Foundation and the Voinovich School at Ohio University found that for every 3.5 affordable and available housing units, there were 10 extremely low income households. From January 2025 to June 2025, The Gathering Place served 116 unhoused individuals. Timothy House, the only shelter open to all unhoused individuals in Athens, has a maximum of 15 beds.

## How will the program operate? How many people can you really serve?

We currently plan to build 3 Conestoga Huts. Eligible for the program will be individuals that we currently serve at The Gathering Place, who are currently unhoused and in need of shelter, who have a goal to find permanent and stable housing, and who are already in mental health and case management services. Those who participate in the program must agree to create and work a wellness plan with benchmarks that will be tracked for data outcomes. Huts will be unlocked in the evening and locked in the morning by staff. Participants will not be permitted to access huts during the day. We expect to serve around 10 individuals per year through this project, with the goal of helping each participant to find opportunities for stable and permanent housing.

## How will sanitation be handled?

Between our two facilities and within 200 feet of the proposed project site, there are 5 restrooms with toilets and sinks, 3 of which have showers. We will also have a porta-john that will be serviced weekly. The porta-john will be in the corner of the lot, hidden from view by the Conestoga Huts. The porta-john will be locked during the day, and inaccessible to non-participants at night. There are many porta-johns throughout the city that have remained up for months at a time, notably on construction sites. Trash receptacles serviced by the city are readily available nearby.

## What is the timeline for this project?

This type of zoning is expected to be re-evaluated after one year. At this time, outcome data will be shared with partners and the community to assess the program.

**For more information on successful models of Conestoga Hut micro-shelters, visit [linktr.ee/conestogahuts](https://linktr.ee/conestogahuts) or scan the QR code.**

**Contact Ginger Schmalenberg at (740) 594-7337 or [ginger@thegatheringplace.com](mailto:ginger@thegatheringplace.com) with questions and concerns.**

