

## Tiny Houses Provide Life-Changing Shelter for Homeless Population

The solar-powered homes provide shelter and community to homeless men, women and families as they work to rebuild their lives

"We had an opportunity to make a powerful impact in our own community and we wanted to do this job right. Morningstar was with us at every step to ensure our system was safe and reliable."

**Rebecca Sanchez**

Vice President of Sales at Solarflexion

## Summary

- Chronic homelessness afflicts over a half-million men, women and children in the United States,\* with veterans particularly vulnerable. Almost 1 out of 4 are in the state of California\*\*
- Turning Point Foundation, a community-based nonprofit in Ventura, California, offers shelter, services, and support to homeless, mentally ill individuals
- A transitional housing project, River Haven, provides housing and a sense of community to individuals ready for independent living
- Morningstar controllers are a key component in the solar lighting system used to power these homes

## Situation

Every night in the United States, hundreds of thousands of men, women and children find themselves sleeping on the streets, or in dangerous, crowded shelters. For some, this is a temporary situation lasting days or weeks, but for others, chronic homelessness stretches on for years. Those affected by mental illness are most likely to find themselves unable to return to a stable way of life. Their circumstances make it difficult to retain a job, rent an apartment, or even navigate the complex web of social services available to them.

The prerequisites for homelessness can affect anyone, but veterans are particularly vulnerable. Although it's hard to accurately track this population segment, studies indicated that more than 10% of the chronic homeless in the US may be veterans. Turning Point Foundation, located in Ventura County, California, provides support and rehabilitation to individuals affected by homelessness, mental illness, and drug-use. The community-based nonprofit has provided assistance to thousands of community members, and particularly veterans, in their 30 years of service. One such project provides temporary housing to transitional residents as they complete job training, addiction counseling or other services as part of their self-rehabilitation journey.



## Project

Turning Point secured funding to replace the flimsy, less reliable U-domes with stronger, longer-lasting housing units made by Tuff Sheds. To design a solar-powered system for the homes, Turning Point Foundation turned to another community leader, Moorpark College. With a small grant of \$22,000, students set out to create self-contained electrical systems to power each of the twenty homes in the community. To help with securing materials and managing costs, Turning Point contacted Morningstar. Morningstar introduced Suki Sir with Turning Point to Rebecca Sanchez, Vice President of Sales at Solarflexion. Solarflexion immediately signed on as a technical advisor for the project.

"They needed an extremely low-cost solution and it needed to be in a locked, enclosed design to keep people safe," she said. "Solarflexion was able to donate time, products, and services to design a system that was safe, reliable and within budget."

Morningstar's engineers, along with Rob Rallo, Senior Engineer at Solar System Services were able to work with the design and suggest a low-cost controller, the SunSaver SS-20L-12V, as a reliable, cost-effective solution.

Working with Solarflexion, Turning Point created a "microgrid" system for individual units, designed around the SunSaver solar controller. This system is able to provide each resident with enough electricity to power a small fan, a lamp, and a mini-fridge, along with a sense of stability through independence from the electrical outages becoming more frequent in this part of California.

Thirty volunteers across the community, including a contingency from Solarflexion, turned out for a "community day" to install the systems. Five systems were installed in a single day, with the rest planned to roll out within weeks. "We have a lot of trust with Morningstar," Sanchez said. "We had an opportunity to make a powerful impact in our own community and we wanted to do this job right. Morningstar was with us at every step to ensure our system was safe and reliable."

## Solution

In 2005, Turning Point Foundation launched an initiative to provide shelter and rehabilitative services to a community of homeless people living along the banks of a river. The River Haven Program provided residents with temporary housing in the form of an enclosed tent-like dome, and provided case managers to assist residents with securing a source of income, job training, medical attention, and drug, alcohol, and mental health services. Residents live in these homes for up to two years, where they undergo individual services while also actively participating in the River Haven community.

These homes, just large enough to accommodate the life-changing essentials of a bed, a chair, and a few possessions, provide a safe haven from harsh elements and dangerous streets. The original enclosures, called U-Domes, were inexpensive to build but had an operational life of only five years, and for economic reasons, used propane for heating. After a fire resulted in the death of a resident, Turning Point realized the need to turn from potentially risky grid electrical wiring to a safer alternative: solar powered electricity.

### Footnotes

\*source: "The State of Homelessness in America," September, 2019; study published by the Council of Economic Advisers to the White House <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/The-State-of-Homelessness-in-America.pdf>

\*\*source: "10 Facts About Homelessness in America," U.S. News and World Report, September 23, 2019 <https://www.usnews.com/news/cities/articles/2019-09-23/10-facts-about-homelessness-in-america>

