

# Proper Furnishings for Shelter and Transitional Housing Facilities

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*A Look at How to Choose Products that Provide Durability  
and a Sense of Home*



WHITE PAPER

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## THE CHALLENGES OF HOMELESS SHELTERS AND TRANSITIONAL HOUSING

On any given night in the United States, 610,042 people experience homelessness, according to the “U.S. Housing and Urban Development’s 2013 Annual Homeless Assessment Report,” where the agency looked at a single night in January 2013 and estimated the number of homeless in this country. And of that total number, the agency reports, more than 396,000 people live in transitional housing or some type of emergency shelter facility. Additionally, 138,149 were children and 57,849 were veterans.

If the numbers are accurate, nearly 400,000 people a night rely on the services of shelters and transitional housing. That is a lot of people to feed, shelter and care for on a daily basis. And considering that many shelters are often underfunded and stigmatized by the community and their neighbors, it can sometimes be difficult to create an environment that helps the homeless feel normalized – create a place that they would actually choose to spend time in.

In regards to furnishings and fixtures, shelters often times rely on thrift store products or discarded and donated items. Products of this kind often cannot handle the continuous use found in these environments. Also, the products are not suited to combat the hygienic challenges that shelters often face. Inevitably, and often quickly, the products break or become unusable, and shelters find themselves in search of replacement items, which may put an unexpected dent in the budget.



On the flip side of this issue, furniture found in shelters historically has been institutional in appearance, does not come in configurations that promote communication and often times does not fit in with the design of the facility. Add to that the fact that shelters are facing an uphill battle against bed bugs, and you can see why furnishings are just as important as the programming within the shelter and the architectural design of the building itself.

To assist shelters and transitional housing environments looking to invest wisely in their facility and create a residential feel inside their walls, this white paper will investigate in great detail what shelters should look for in furniture. To illustrate these points, this report includes:

- An in-depth look at three of the leading problems that shelters consistently face in regards to furniture and fixtures
- Profiles of a shelter architect, shelter president/CEO and interior designer who have or are currently working in shelter environments and have experience in picking furnishings for facilities
- A list of the many attributes – whether it is tables, chairs, beds, the colors to choose and more – that you should look for in shelter furnishings

## BED BUGS

Bed bugs are not a new problem and are not an isolated issue for shelters. Hotels, homes, office buildings, commercial facilities and other environments are susceptible to the pesky creature. And while bed bugs slowly became less of a nuisance in the mid-20th century, the United States has seen an alarming rise in their numbers in recent years, according to a joint report from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA).

However, in contrast to many commercial and residential facilities, shelters house those who may have spent time living on the streets or in other unhygienic places where bed bugs are found. Inevitably, bed bugs make their way into shelters by traveling on the clothes, baggage or on a person's body once they enter the facility. What's also inevitable is that bed bugs will make their way on to the furnishings inside where they will find cracks and crevices to call their homes.

Bed bugs can nestle themselves inside the seams of inferior mattresses and are often times "found in the bed, along the seams and sides of the mattress and box spring, the headboard, and bed frame, creating clusters of live bed bugs, shed skins, dark-colored fecal spots, and eggs," according to a Cornell University report titled "Guidelines for Prevention and Management of Bed Bugs in Shelters and Group Living Facilities."



In many cases, beds, mattresses and chairs become so infested that the product needs to be replaced. Facilities have options, however, and can pick furniture that is bed-bug resistant, ensuring that their investment will last for years to come.

## CONSTANT USE

It is an understatement that shelter environments are in constant use. On any given day, shelters welcome a steady stream of those seeking services on a 24/7 basis.

One example of a busy facility is the Boulder Shelter for the Homeless in Colorado. According to its 2013 Annual report, the shelter provided "38,892 bed nights and 90,823 meals for 1,179 homeless men and women in need," the report says.

Add to that 800 volunteers who donated more than 11,000 hours of their time and you have a facility that is under that constant strain of wear and tear.

This is just one example of hundreds if not thousands of facilities that offer services to the homeless or those in transition. And for these facilities, the constant sitting on chairs, laying on beds, spills on tables and other kinds of wear and tear can be taxing. Therefore it is important to select furniture that is specifically designed to handle this kind of stress and that can stand up to the constant use found in shelter environments.

## INSTITUTIONAL DESIGN

Shelters have been stigmatized through the ages as dingy facilities, occupied by unfortunate people who are thinking of where their next meal will come from and not the art on the wall, the design of the chair they are sitting in or the durability of the bed they will sleep in that night.

This is far from the truth. In her Master's thesis from Eastern Michigan University titled "Interior Design in the Realm of Social Services: Housing the Homeless," Amanda Kaserman Leininger sites that "If a shelter is designed poorly and unattractive, it will communicate a low regard for its users and homeless individuals will be less likely to use the space."

"Due to the emotions a homeless person could be experiencing when entering the space, it is critical that these spaces are designed to convey qualities of a sanctuary and refuge to establish trust between the homeless and the facility staff and volunteers" and that "Public spaces should be designed to avoid the feeling of institutionalization."

Additionally, the thesis reports that "Due to the emotions a homeless person could be experiencing when entering the space, it is critical that these spaces are designed to convey qualities of a sanctuary and refuge to establish trust between the homeless and the facility staff and volunteers" and that "Public spaces should be designed to avoid the feeling of institutionalization."

And while design incorporates everything from the entryway, the color on the walls, the landscaping outside and the light fixtures hanging from the ceilings, it also incorporates the color of the table, the curve of a chair and the pattern of upholstery that can help a facility feel a little more like home.

## BRIAN NELSON - THE HOMELESS ARCHITECT

Aside from the 65 rescue missions he has designed or consulted on, Brian Nelson has also worked on homeless shelters, transitional housing and permanent supportive housing projects throughout the United States. It's no wonder that his work has garnered him the title "The Homeless Architect."

And it wasn't by accident. It was a calling from a higher spirit, he says.

In 1985 he was chosen to design and consult on the Santa Barbara Rescue Mission in California and soon after became the Business Administrator and Executive Director for the facility – a position he held for a year and a half.

“After my stint at the facility was over, God asked me what I was going to do with all of the knowledge I had gained from my time there,” he said. “He then told me to go set up a booth at the Association of Gospel Rescue Missions Convention. I knew then that I would dedicate my life’s work to designing facilities for the homeless or those that are in some kind of transitional stage in their life.”

An avid surfer, Nelson says he never was a stranger looking in from the outside. The Vietnam vet battled post traumatic stress disorder and alcoholism and understands what many of the people who live in shelters are experiencing on an emotional, psychological and sociological level.

“It’s not a job for me,” he says. “It’s my passion. And it’s not just the design and facility. It’s the people who use it.”

Nelson notes that designing a shelter is unlike any other facility, and that extreme durability, residential design and a maintenance program must be in place in for shelters to be successful.



“It’s a 24/7, 365 days a year operation in many cases,” he says. “It has to be built to last. But it also has to be aesthetically pleasing. If it isn’t, then many might not stay at the shelter or the design itself may have a negative psychological impact on those who use it.”

For example, when choosing furnishings for shelters, Nelson recommends using café tables instead of long rectangular tables which promote communication among those who use it. Additionally, with round café tables, there is no one at the head of the table, which assists in helping all feel equal.

He also recommends that shelters stray away from anything remotely institutional in appearance when selecting furniture. That means facilities should introduce furniture with color, texture and a residential appearance in order to create a feeling of belonging in facilities that have traditionally felt like anything but home.

“Sometimes those working at the facility will say ‘we have a thrift store and we can use thrift store furniture,’” Nelson said. “I ask them ‘do you really want people coming through your doors and sleeping on thrift store furniture?’”

Just as important, Nelson says, is the implementation of a maintenance program. Part of this program should include the cleaning and sanitizing of furniture. Therefore, furniture that is easily cleaned is recommended, Nelson said, along with furniture that is resistant to bed bugs.

"I always recommend putting a reasonable amount of money in the budget to buy durable furniture that matches the feel of the facility," he said. "Many times furniture is that last thing they think about. But it should be up there at the top of the list."

## **DON SHISLER - UNION GOSPEL MISSION**

The Union Gospel Mission of Tarrant County in Fort Worth, TX "is a united Christian organization and ministry dedicated to providing love, hope, respect and a new beginning for the homeless in Tarrant County," according to its website. The mission President and CEO Don Shisler says the facility sees 600 to 700 people a day visiting its facility.

This includes those who seek out services and the volunteers and employees who work there. Remarkably, the facility also provides programming for 1,200 people a year. This includes an intake session, a case management plan, mental and physical health screenings and other programming to support the homeless as they attempt to re-enter society.

"We used to take discarded furniture or donations and it was oftentimes made of wood or it was made for residential settings," he said. "Unfortunately, this furniture would break easily and we would have to go out and find replacement pieces just after a short period of time."

Shisler has been at the facility for 20 years and says it has been a long process in getting the shelter into the shape that it needed to be.

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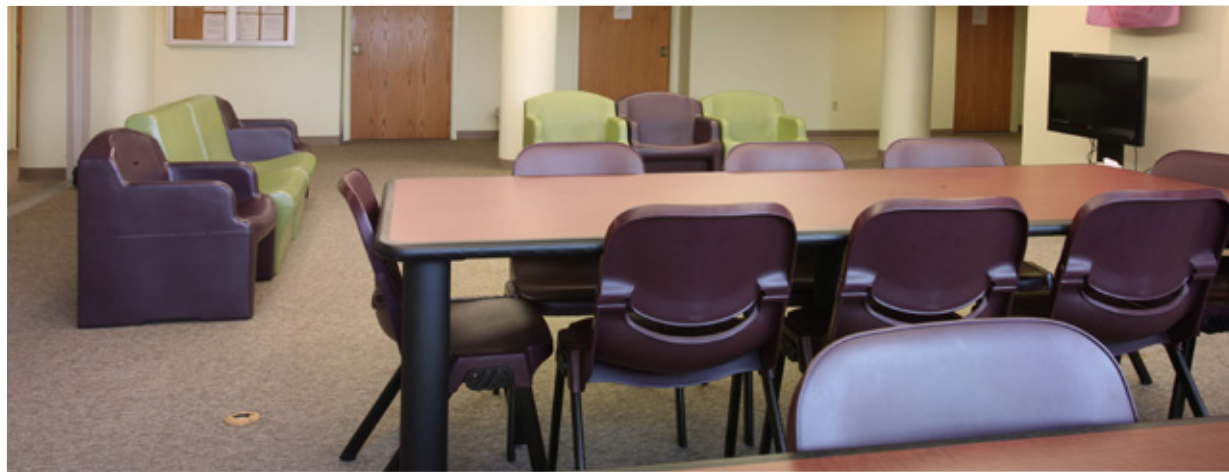
After years of this routine, the facility decided to create a strategic plan which included the development of a donor base that would allow them to invest in – among many priorities – furniture that would last.

"We wanted to be good stewards of the money we received. So we went in search of furniture that would stand the test of time," he said. "Plus we wanted to create a nice environment that would be pleasing not only to those who seek our services, but also those who work here as well."

In turn, Shisler looked for and purchased furniture that could hold up to the strain of constant use and the various weight of those using it. He also wanted sturdy furniture that was made with hinges, legs and other parts that were extremely durable.

Additionally, the facility's furniture needed to be easy to clean. Shisler says that some visitors to the facility – as it is with shelters in general – have communicable diseases. Therefore easy disinfection is paramount. A clean environment, he says, can add to the overall wellbeing of those who spend time there.

“We want everyone to be in a comfortable and clean environment,” Shisler said. “And when they visit here, they know it’s clean by the look and smell of this place.”



Lastly, Shisler says he truly believes that an environment can either have a positive or negative impact on a person's mental health. Therefore, when looking for furniture, Shisler sought out well designed products that were not institutional.

“Coming in to a nice facility is quite different than what they receive on the outside. And this is accomplished by providing them with bright colors, art, photos, ceramics, well-maintained grounds and furniture that is residential in appearance,” he said. “Furniture of this kind is not often cheap. But as I always tell people, if it’s manufactured correctly, you only have to buy it once.”

## **JESSICA KAISER - KAISER BUSINESS INTERIORS**

Kaiser Business Interiors is a small commercial furniture firm headquartered in the heart of downtown Tucson, Arizona. Founded in early 2014, the firm recently had the opportunity to collaborate with Swaim Architects on the design and furnishings for a new shelter for The Salvation Army, dubbed the Hospitality House, in Tucson.

CEO Jessica Kaiser said that although she has worked on many commercial spaces throughout the western United States, she had never worked on a shelter facility.

“The idea of being involved with a project that is both a notable addition to the Tucson community and an interesting design challenge was very exciting to me,” she said. “It was of the utmost importance to me and my team to provide a complete solution that met all of the unique requirements of a shelter environment. I began my research for the project by looking at other shelter environments in southern Arizona. I had the opportunity to tour the existing Hospitality House in Tucson and developed a true understanding of the client’s needs and sense of the importance of this project for the community. I also did extensive research on several manufacturers that both met the criteria for the environment, and would afford the space a welcoming aesthetic.”

The ground-up construction project – which will replace the current and outdated Hospitality House – is being developed in two anticipated phases. Phase I – which Kaiser worked on – consists of the construction of a two story, 33,500 sq foot facility that will provide a total of 122 beds to men, women, veterans and families in emergency and transitional status.



Kaiser’s role was to work directly with the Salvation Army and Swaim Architects throughout the process of finalizing the building design and creating the furniture specifications. This included:

- Programming the client furniture needs in each of the offices and community spaces.
- Providing furniture solutions that were cohesive with the architects design vision and that were suitable for the intensive use environment.
- Preparing a proposal for board approval
- Coordinating the receiving and installation of products from more than 10 different manufacturers.



During the process, Kaiser assessed the intended functionality of each of the spaces within the building as it was designed and offered furniture solutions accordingly. This involved much discussion and consideration in an attempt to optimize the unique space – unique because of its architectural design and its constant-use environment.

“Budget is an important element in any project. This one in particular. We were very diligent about selecting products that we knew would provide the client with longevity. We were not going to cut corners on quality where it was especially important,” she said.

In addition to durability and value, the team recognized that providing an environment that was welcoming and comfortable was particularly important for a shelter environment.

“We wanted to create a space that was as homelike as it could be for clients that are regularly in a state of distress,” she said. “Accordingly, we looked for products with warm finishes and that were easy to sanitize and clean and that helped create that residential feel that is often very hard to find in shelter environments. Bleachable fabrics, resistance to bedbugs and solid furniture construction were top priorities.”

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## WHAT TO LOOK FOR IN SHELTER FURNITURE

Durability. Design that promotes well-being. Easily sanitized and bed-bug resistant. But how? And what specifically should shelters look for in furniture. The information below is intended to provide facilities a thorough check list of the attributes that are essential in shelter furniture.

### Use of color

Tara Rae Hill, founder of LittleFISH Think Tank, said “the interior volume either gains the confidence and comfort of the human within it, or by contrast it just as easily demotes this within the human. So, color plays a role on all surfaces and elements: floors, walls, ceilings, furniture, cabinetry, privacy panels and on and on. This does not mean that every element must be an expressive hue, which actually should not be the case. It does mean, however, that all items should be given conscious thought and consideration regarding their design and color.”

Facilities looking to create a residential appearance should introduce colors other than institutional grays. Also, hues that work well with the design of the facility and the colors already in place are highly recommended.

## Design

Design also plays a fundamental role in how furniture is received by those who use it. Furniture that is broken, worn or, by contrast, is institutional in appearance is not suitable for shelter environments. Look for furniture that can introduce modern design and residential accents that can make those who use it feel at home.

## Upholstery

Upholstery is a great way to soften furniture and add an aesthetic touch not always found in shelter environments. But upholstery is not suitable for all spaces within a shelter environment. Choose upholstery for dayrooms and other spaces where groups might gather aside from dining areas. Additionally, ensure that the upholstery is easy to clean and resistant to flame, chemicals and bodily fluids and that has passed the California Technical Bulletin 117 Section E. For durability, fabric abrasion should exceed 100,000 double rubs on the Wyzenbeek Scale.

## Hardware

It's often overlooked, but the hardware on chairs, tables and beds can be just as important as any other part of the product. When picking furniture, be sure the pieces come with nuts, bolts, screws, rivets and other fasteners that are not easy to loosen. Additionally, make sure the hardware is made out of durable metal and comes with rounded edges for safety. Most table manufacturers attach table bases to the tops via wood screws into particle board. Frequent movement, as in a multi-purpose room, will loosen the screws resulting in a wobbly table needing repair or replacement. Proper attachment involves embedded T-nuts in the table top providing a metal-to-metal connection enhanced with Loc-Tite.

## Steel vs. wood

Nothing says home like wood furniture. But this option isn't always the best choice for shelter environments. Untreated wood, cut ends or joints will harbor bedbugs as easily as upholstery or cloth mattresses, unlike steel furniture which, when constructed properly, is resistant to the pest. Additionally, steel constructed drawers and cabinets allow drawer glides to be welded to the body, with no moving parts to break or wear out. Buyers also should be aware of the climate and humidity conditions in their area. Wood swells and shrinks in changing conditions leading to loose joints and ultimate breakdown. Wood grain laminate panels can be added to steel furniture to achieve a residential look without the drawbacks of climate changes or bedbug invasion.

## Mattresses

Mattresses, in short, can become a mess if you let them. That is if you pick a product that is not suitable for the environment. Standard residential quality cloth mattresses are constructed with cloth sewn seams, easily penetrated by bedbugs. Any serious manufacturer for the shelter market will provide mattresses with an impervious fabric with inverted sealed seams thus locking out bedbug infestation and the need for separate slip covers and fumigation. Shelters combat constant use, bed bugs and bodily fluids. So when picking mattresses, look for antimicrobial covers and bedbug-resistant, inverted sealed seam construction, which is the premium option for shelter environments. Covers also should be non-absorbent, crack resistant, anti-static, anti-bacterial, stain resistant, anti-fungal and breathable.

## Bunk beds

In order to save on valuable space, some shelters may opt to install bunk beds in their facilities. If so, make sure the beds are made of steel and are equipped with rounded edges for safety. Also, to ensure beds aren't tipped over or moved, shelters may want to bolt the beds down for safety and equip them with safety rails and sturdy ladders. If fitted with spring mattress decks, watch for sharp ends or spring protrusions that can snag or tear mattresses.

## Dining table bases

Legs, x-bases and pedestal bases are all acceptable in shelter facilities. In general the bases should be attached with wood screws into the particle board laminate tops. Some tables come with T-nuts in the tops to accept machine screws with Loc-Tite® to assure the bases will never loosen or wobble.

## Selecting dining chairs

There are many different chairs on the market that are suitable for the different kinds of seating environments found in shelters. For example, in individual kitchen units or dining halls that also serve as multi-purpose rooms, it's desirable to have individual chairs that can be stacked when not in use or that can be arranged in rows for meetings. For dayrooms, activity rooms and meeting rooms, shelters may want to consider lounge chairs that can be bolted down, ballasted or freestanding and come in a more residential design.



## Book cases

Books are an effective way to make a facility feel more like home. Shelters may want to stray from traditional free-standing, residential book shelves and go with products made of high-impact polymer that can be mounted to a wall. Also, look for seamless construction for easy cleaning and rounded edges for safety.

## Night stands and drawer units

These two products can give personal space to those staying at a shelter facility. Like beds, it is recommended that wood night stands and drawers not be used. Instead look for steel or high-impact polymer pieces that come with optional laminate tops and sturdy construction. If choosing steel, select pieces with welded drawing glides and drawers that cannot be removed.

## IN CONCLUSION

When choosing furniture for your facility, the key questions to ask are:

- Can I choose colors that are non-institutional and that can complement the design of my facility?
- What is the product made of and is it resistant to bed bugs and fluids and easy to clean?
- Do the pieces come with residential laminate accents and durable upholstery options to make the furniture feel more residential?
- How do I know it's durable? What testing has the product undergone and is it made for constant use?
- What are the mattresses made of and do they come with an inverted or sealed seam?
- What other facilities have used the same products and what success have they seen?

## RESOURCES

[U.S. Housing and Urban Development's 2013 Annual Homeless Assessment Report](#)

[U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention \(CDC\) and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency](#)

[Cornell University: Guidelines for Prevention and Management of Bed Bugs in Shelters and Group Living Facilities](#)

[Interior Design in the Realm of Social Services: Housing the Homeless](#)

[Brian Nelson - The Homeless Architect](#)

[Union Gospel Mission](#)

[Tara Rae Hill, founder of LittleFISH Think Tank](#)

## ABOUT NORIX

Norix designs innovative, robust furniture that meets the real-world need for humanizing challenging environments. For more than 30 years, the company has served the behavioral healthcare, corrections, fire/rescue, military, shelter, public safety and variety of commercial industries by providing uniquely reliable furnishings for every application. All furniture is designed for safety, security and extreme durability. Norix furniture is extraordinary by design, surpassing industry standards for strength, safety and long-term performance. Aside from its durability, Norix products also come in aesthetically pleasing designs and colors and are made especially for facilities that require furniture that can humanize their environments.

The privately held company is headquartered in West Chicago, IL with consultative sales representatives and dealers throughout the U.S. In 2012, Norix launched Safe Environments, a news and information blog serving architects, designers, administrators and facility managers involved in the design, construction, and operation of challenging environments. For more information, call 800-234-4900 or visit [www.norix.com](http://www.norix.com).



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