



## Guide to hosting a shantytown event

STEFFAN HACKER

**Shantytown:** A shantytown, also commonly referred to as a slum, is defined by the United Nations as an illegal or unauthorized settlement of impoverished people, which is characterized by substandard housing, squalor and lack of tenure security.

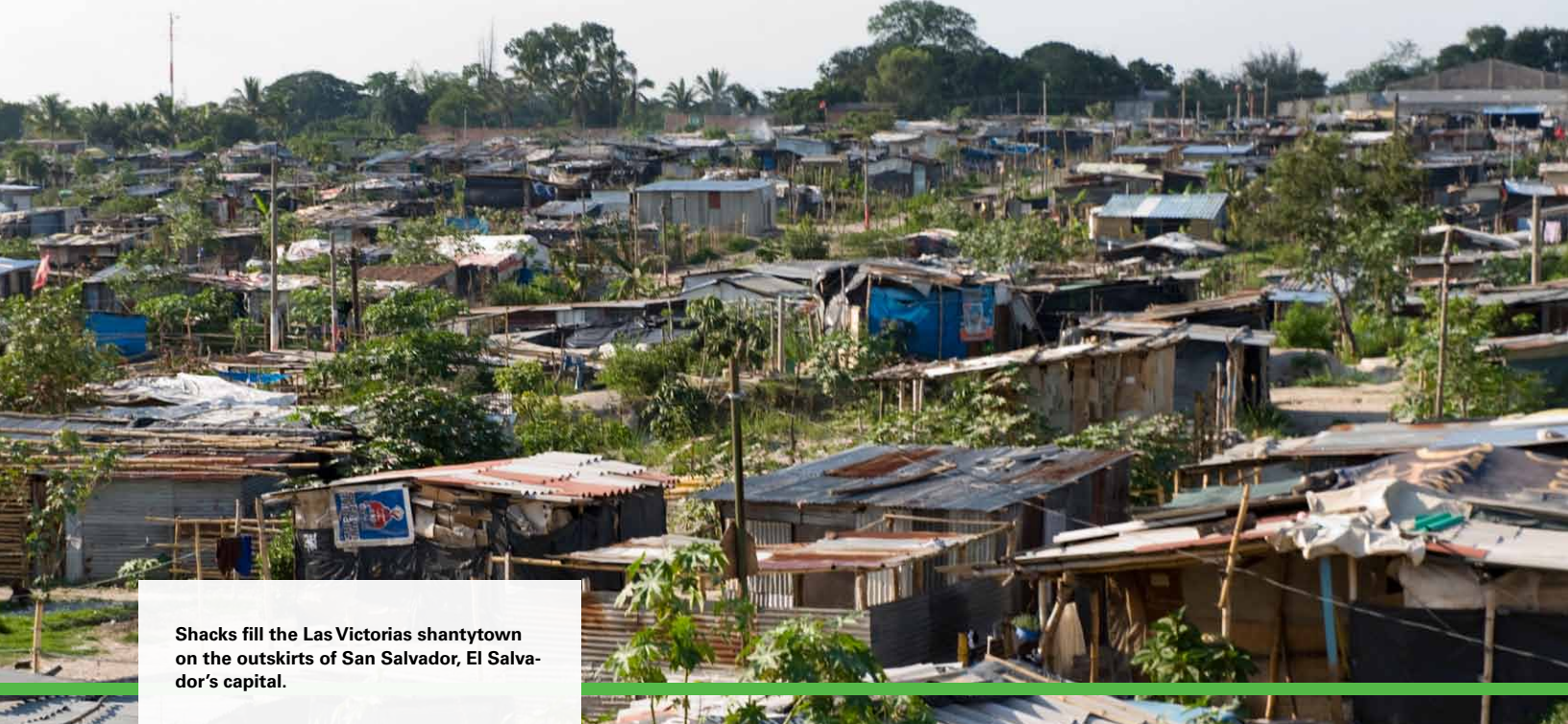
### Overview of shantytown events

During a shantytown event, students spend at least one night sleeping outside in cardboard boxes or constructed shacks in order to draw attention to housing issues, advocate for affordable housing, and educate participants and visitors. The event may include one shack or many, and involve chapter members only or students from across campus. The chapter might incorporate a variety of activities, including games, a fundraising element, speakers and time for reflection.

Shantytowns have been called many names: shackathon, sleep out, cardboard city, etc. Habitat for Humanity International encourages use of the term shantytown, as it best acknowledges those who live in such substandard housing throughout the world.

A shantytown event can be a valuable tool for your campus chapter or Youth United group. This event can help your group:

- Educate your local community about local housing issues.
- Bring awareness to the global housing crisis.
- Share Habitat for Humanity's mission and work.
- Advocate to change systems, policies, attitudes and institutional behaviors that lead to inadequate housing and homelessness. Your group can also educate attendees and visitors about how they can join the fight to eliminate poverty housing.



**Shacks fill the Las Victorias shantytown on the outskirts of San Salvador, El Salvador's capital.**

EZRA MILLSTEIN

### **Shantytowns are real**

Today there are 1 billion people, one-sixth of the world's population, living in shantytowns. Dwellings are typically made from scrap plywood, corrugated metal and sheets of plastic. Often, shantytowns do not have adequate access to safe water, sanitation, electricity or telephone services. The number of people living in shantytowns is expected to grow to 2 billion by 2030.

Shantytowns exist worldwide. One of the largest shantytowns in the world is Orangi Township in Karachi, Pakistan, where approximately 1 million people live in only 100,000 houses. Other examples of large shantytown settlements include Kibera in Nairobi, Kenya; Dharavi in Mumbai, India; and Neza-Chalco-Itza barrio in Mexico City, Mexico.

### **Habitat for Humanity's work to offer a hand up**

As a nonprofit, ecumenical Christian housing ministry, Habitat for Humanity seeks to make simple, decent housing a matter of conscience and action in order to eliminate poverty housing from the world. Habitat for Humanity has worked in partnership with local communities, volunteers and partner families to provide more than 1.75 million people with safe, decent, affordable housing.

Habitat has served families in more than 3,000 communities around the world. Internationally, many Habitat partner families come from shantytowns and urban slums. Shantytowns are not typical of the substandard conditions faced by Habitat for Humanity partner families in the United States. Currently, the only homeless populations that Habitat for Humanity works with directly are those living outside of the United States and Canada. This is an important distinction to recognize in planning, publicizing and holding the event.

As ambassadors of Habitat for Humanity, it is important to represent Habitat for Humanity appropriately and to expose your local community to a realistic representation of the housing crisis many people face throughout the world.



## Organizing a shantytown event

A lot of planning, hard work and follow-up go into a successful event. Below is a list of recommended steps in planning a shantytown event:

### Assemble a team

This team will plan, coordinate and carry out the shantytown event. Responsibilities for the event such as public relations coordinating, materials collecting, logistics coordinating, etc. can be divided among team members.

### Clarify your goals

Think about what your group hopes to accomplish so that all aspects of the event can work toward these goals. Consider:

- What do you want attendees and passers-by to learn by attending or visiting the event?
- What are you advocating? What is your specific ask?
- Will the event be a fundraiser?

### Plan the event

Schedule and locate your shantytown to ensure high participation and as large an audience as possible. Aim for a highly visible location and time to increase the potential for passers-by.

As your group chooses a date and location, be sure to:

- Get approval from your campus administration.
- Check with your partner Habitat affiliate to confirm it supports the event and can attend.
- Contact campus police so they are aware of your event and you know of any restrictions that may pertain.

When choosing the location and date, consider:

- Other events that might draw a crowd, such as a big basketball game or school dance.
- Involving the community beyond your school by holding the event off campus.
- The amount of light the location has during all times of the day.
- The time of year. If you choose the harsh, cold weather of winter, will students be walking by your shantytown?

Make a plan for activities during the event. Based on your goals, decide what will take place and who will be involved. See below for event ideas.

### Publicize the event

Be creative to gain the attention and interest of members of your campus, community and the media. Make sure to get the word out early, especially if multiple groups will be participating, and formally invite media from your school and community. Consider:

- Word-of-mouth advertising.
- Campus and community media (newspaper, radio, television, etc.).
- Posters, signs and fliers around campus.
- Social media.

“ Each spring, BU Habitat holds a three-day sleep-out event at the center plaza of our campus. Every evening, members and non-members of BU Habitat converge to not only spend the night outdoors but also promote the cause of Habitat for Humanity. We have the traditional fliers and posters, but BU Habitat members also engage passers-by in conversation. ”

— Boston University, Mass.

- Invitations to other student organizations or local organizations with like-minded missions.
- Asking professors and teachers to join you or tell their classes about the event.

### Collect materials and supplies

Ask local appliance and department stores for leftover boxes well in advance, so they can save you boxes for your event. Make sure that you have a place to store boxes until the day of the event. Don't forget about masking tape, posters and markers for signs.

If you plan to have food for your event, decide what type of food you would like to provide and whether you want to make it part of the shantytown experience. Determine your budget and decide whether you will ask for donations.

### Hold the event

You can have a variety of activities during the event to educate participants and passers-by. Consider the following:

- Host a speaker. Invite speakers to discuss the issues of substandard housing and the mission and efforts of Habitat for Humanity. Speakers might include:
  - Representatives from your local affiliate or other social agencies.
  - Habitat homeowners.
  - School faculty.
  - Local government figures.
  - Chapter or Youth United group members.
- Organize a Habitat trivia or bingo game. Come up with creative ways to engage your participants that are fun and also informative.
- Host a concert. Plan a benefit concert for your chapter near your shantytown. Invite campus bands to perform.
- Write letters. Hold a letter-writing campaign. Write letters to your elected officials advocating affordable housing legislation.
- Raise money. You might:
  - Have participants collect pledges for each hour they spend outside during the event.
  - Make donation jars available to collect contributions from passers-by.
  - Identify faculty and staff who are willing to sleep out if the chapter is able to collect a certain amount of money in their name.
  - Charge a fee for student groups to build a shanty.
  - Turn it into a competition, giving awards for those who have the best design, most popular, etc.). Charge an entry fee for those who want to participate.
- Give them the facts. Educate participants and passers-by about what Habitat does by sharing information about the need. Collect statistics on housing, homelessness and Habitat statistics ahead of time, and share this information during the event. You might have participants:
  - Hand out fliers about substandard housing and Habitat, and what they can do.
  - Talk with anyone who walks by your display.
  - Make signs, posters and sandwich boards with housing statistics and ideas for action.
  - Spray-paint facts about poverty housing onto the cardboard shanties.
  - Write facts with chalk on the concrete surrounding your event.

“ We made the event much more public by engaging community leaders and holding the event off-campus at the downtown community park.

We also attracted many interested people by having entertainment: jazz band, DJ, national award-winning slam poet and three Habitat partner families share the meaning of their experience as HFH homeowners. Also, we were able to obtain four new applications for possible future partner families.

— Spoon River Community College, Ill.





With an estimated population of more than 1 million people, Kibera, in Nairobi, Kenya, is the largest slum in all of Africa.

STEFFAN HACKER

- Don't forget pictures. Display pictures and news clippings of your Habitat chapter, including work projects, fundraisers and educational events. Ask your affiliate for pictures or a display from its efforts at the local level.

### Reflect

Reflection is extremely important for an event like this and allows participants to think critically about their experience. Facilitate a reflection session in the morning to help people process and walk away with a deeper understanding of housing issues. Possible reflection questions:

- How did you feel during the event? Did your feelings change over the course of the night?
- What did you miss most while staying in the shantytown?
- What surprised you about the experience?
- How is this experience similar to living in a real shantytown? How is it different?

As a facilitator, it is important to remind the participants that what they experienced during the event is not homelessness. Remind your participants that nearly 1 billion people worldwide currently live in substandard conditions with minimal or no access to safe water and food, and do not have the opportunity to leave the situation after a few hours.

Let the participants know what they can do after the shantytown event is over to continue supporting efforts to end poverty housing. Be sure to provide information about getting involved with your group and the local Habitat for Humanity affiliate.

### Follow up after the event

After your event, make sure that you look to the future with responsibility:

- Clean up the area.
- Send out thank-you notes to all supporters.

- Write a letter to the editor addressing housing issues in your area and worldwide.
- Follow up with participants who are not part of your group to see if they are interested in joining.
- Organize records of the event, including what worked well and what did not, to help plan future events.

### **More information**

Thank you for your work to make housing a matter of conscience and action! If you have questions about organizing a shantytown event, contact [youthprograms@habitat.org](mailto:youthprograms@habitat.org) or (800) HABITAT, ext. 2412.

“ Our biggest advocacy event is our annual Habitat for Humanity Sleep Out. For this event, our chapter spends 24 hours on the Michigan Diag—the heart and crossroads of our campus. With this 24-hour period we hope to give our participants a chance to experience what it might be like to live, even if just for a day, without a home.

*During Sleep Out, we host several exciting and educational activities such as a housing issue discussion circle and keynote speeches from people such as affiliate directors or local housing advocates.*

*We also create an environment for students to express their own feelings and ideas based on the goals and ideals of our campus chapter. For instance, we invite other student individuals or student groups to perform pieces that speak to housing issues, for example, poetry slams or acoustic songs.*

*We also spread throughout the campus community during Sleep Out, participating in activities such as a scavenger hunt that benefits our local homeless shelter, all the while disseminating information on Habitat for Humanity. With these advocacy activities, our campus chapter aims to increase campus awareness not only of our student organization, but also of the very important mission we strive toward.*

*Hopefully, the experiences and insights gained from Sleep Out will spur participants to continue thinking about the issues of homelessness and inadequate housing in ways that will inspire them to take further action.*

—University of Michigan



## Resources

### Understanding poverty issues

- World Habitat Day handbook: <http://my.habitat.org/GlobalLink.aspx?GID=g30f78>
- 2010 Habitat for Humanity shelter report: [http://www.habitat.org/gov/take\\_action/shelter\\_report\\_2010.aspx](http://www.habitat.org/gov/take_action/shelter_report_2010.aspx)
- “The Martinez Tale: A look at shelter, settlement and sustainable livelihoods” from Habitat for Humanity Latin America/Caribbean: [http://www.habitat.org/habitat\\_learns/martinez\\_tale/index.html](http://www.habitat.org/habitat_learns/martinez_tale/index.html)

### Publicity

- Habitat for Humanity International’s affiliate guide to working with the media: <http://my.habitat.org/GlobalLink.aspx?GID=g30de2>
- Habitat for Humanity International’s affiliate guide to social media: <http://my.habitat.org/GlobalLink.aspx?GID=g30de3>

### Educational and advocacy activities

- Habitat for Humanity’s youth programs advocacy activities: [http://www.habitat.org/youthprograms/parent\\_teacher\\_leader/resources/parent\\_teacher\\_leader\\_resources.aspx](http://www.habitat.org/youthprograms/parent_teacher_leader/resources/parent_teacher_leader_resources.aspx)
- Habitat for Humanity’s Government Relations and Advocacy “Take action” tools: [http://www.habitat.org/gov/take\\_action/default.aspx](http://www.habitat.org/gov/take_action/default.aspx)

### Images and articles

- “Dharavi: Mumbai’s shadow city” from National Geographic (May 2007, Mark Jacobson): <http://ngm.nationalgeographic.com/2007/05/dharavi-mumbai-slum/jacobson-text>
- “The places we live,” a photo essay on shantytowns by Jonas Bendiksen: <http://www.theplaceswelive.com>

### Habitat for Humanity’s impact

- Habitat for Humanity homeowners’ stories: [http://www.habitat.org/faces\\_places/](http://www.habitat.org/faces_places/)
- Habitat for Humanity’s photo gallery: <http://www.habitat.org/photogallery/album.aspx>
- Habitat for Humanity’s video gallery: <http://www.habitat.org/videogallery/default.aspx>
- Habitat for Humanity U.S. affiliate fact sheet: <http://my.habitat.org/GlobalLink.aspx?GID=g2f514>

### Reflection

- Habitat for Humanity’s guide for reflective discussion: <http://my.habitat.org/GlobalLink.aspx?GID=5414>
- The Corporation for National and Community Service reflection toolkit: <http://nationalserviceresources.org/files/legacy/filemanager/download/615/nwtoolkit.pdf>