

# FRESNO STATE TODAY

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## In her backyard: Alumna's innovative approach to addressing homelessness

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Located south of Fresno, just before the Highway 198 interchange, Goshen is a small, one-exit stop before Visalia and Hanford. to Visalia or Hanford. On the northeast side of town, where apartments and tract homes meet a warehouse district, sits a new gated community that is a bit different from its neighbors. The small neighborhood looks like many new developments with wide streets, a small park and a large community center.

At a glance, the main thing that sets this neighborhood apart is the homes are all single-wide one- or two-bedroom modular homes, a bit smaller than your typical gated community. However, the unique part of this community is that the nearly 80 people who live in the 53 units were previously unhoused, and the community center, Unity Hall, provides services aimed to support their neighbors as they rebuild their lives.

The neighborhood, [Salt + Light](#), is the brainchild of Fresno State alumna Adrienne Hillman, who earned her bachelor's degree in liberal studies in 2000. Hillman found her calling after she was asked to serve on a nonprofit board to replace a family friend who had passed away.

"I was shocked at what I was seeing with the way that the system was operating. I really thought something could be done better," Hillman said. "We were doing a lot of transactional giving and doing, but it's not helping."

What was missing, she said, was the relationship aspect.

Hillman was inspired to create a new type of organization to help people in the community who are unhoused. In October 2019, she held the "In My Backyard" launch party – a clever spin on the common "not in my backyard" objections heard around homelessness efforts.

"I literally had it in my backyard. I had 475 people there and launched this vision. No money, no volunteers, no employees, just a dream," Hillman said.

### **Early challenges**

After that initial launch party, unforeseen challenges began to mount. A week later, Hillman's father suffered a heart attack while having a routine angiogram and had to have emergency open-heart surgery. At the same time, both of her grandparents were also in the hospital, suffering from different ailments. Days later, her grandmother passed away.

Then, in March 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic began, and the world shut down. Traditional fundraising efforts were not possible, nor were face-to-face meetings with donors. Instead, Hillman took the time to build Salt + Light's business infrastructure. She hired help to create the employee handbook and develop human resources policies and procedures.

The plan was to build a "forged family" community with the primary goal to help individuals return to their true selves through belonging. To accomplish this, Hillman put

forward Salt + Light's six foundational pillars: mental health services, physical health, job skills, nutrition, social engagement and drug and alcohol counseling. She said the organization is different because it focuses on a relational model rather than a cheaper, easier-to-manage transactional model.

During the pandemic, the [Kings/Tulare Homeless Alliance](#) reached out to Salt + Light for help feeding people in the streets. The alliance provided a small grant, and Hillman purchased a used food truck, refurbished it, and began providing meals for folks who are unhoused.

"That food truck was not part of my original vision, but it actually was a game-changer and taught us what we needed to know about what people really needed on the streets. It also showed me the power of relationships and consistency," Hillman said.

The food truck now serves over 2,700 meals every month and delivers socks, winter gear, hygiene products and tents to those in need. The truck has provided the added benefit of serving as a fundraiser at events, such as the annual Tulare World Ag Expo, which incidentally sits on one of Hillman's ancestral farmland plots.

## **Building a community**

In 2022, Salt + Light partnered with [Self-Help Enterprises](#) to break ground on the village in Goshen. In September 2024, Salt + Light moved in, officially bringing the vision to fruition.

It takes many community relationships to provide the level of service Salt + Light dispenses. One notable relationship is with the Fresno State [Mobile Health Unit](#) that provides health care services to the community nearly every Thursday.

"The Fresno State [Mobile Health Unit] has really cared for our neighbors in a really important way," Hillman said. "They've made relationships with them, and I think the students have really seen success by being able to serve people."

Dr. Lynn Jakobs, director of the Mobile Health Unit program, said the experience allows students to work in the nurse-led mobile clinic and with a faculty instructor.

"You're in the field, so you don't often have the same resources that you might have in a large brick-and-mortar clinic. This brings creativity and resourcefulness to the table," Jakobs said. "The students get to connect risk factors and socioeconomic determinants of health to their outcomes; the chronic diseases or problems that the patients present with."

Salt + Light staff say the neighbors value the consistent visits, which make the residents feel important, valued and respected.

“That’s not something many of them have ever felt with other physicians or in traditional medical settings. It’s made a huge difference,” said Jason Quijada, director of the Neighbor Care program at Salt + Light.

As far as results, Hillman said no residents have returned to homelessness on the streets after over a year of operation.

“We have wraparound care, but I think that the lack of whole person care is what the problem is with the revolving door of affordable housing and homelessness,” Hillman said. “This extra investment is actually what’s keeping people housed.”

Looking forward, Hillman continues to have big plans for Salt + Light, including an expansion of the neighborhood village with more housing units and an art and entrepreneurial hub to give neighbors more creative and vocational outlets, such as a luxury bath and candle line and a farmers market, all designed to provide jobs and entrepreneurial training to the neighbors.

Hillman is also launching an educational department to teach other nonprofit leaders how to start their own villages and food distribution centers.

She recently brought that message to the TEDx Visalia stage.