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## Idea born in Victorian Village spreads throughout city

Extra measure helps keep homeless population safe

By [Jane Roberts](#), Daily Memphian

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**The Hospitality Hub is one of the agencies regularly serving the homeless that is sanitized by EcoPro Services, a division of Empower Employers.** (Mark Weber/The Daily Memphian)

Clarence Johnson lives at the Union Mission at 170 Tillman St. with a full-time job and heart of gratitude.

Five days a week, he disinfects what started as 10 facilities that serve the homeless and downtrodden in Memphis.

## Construction begins on women's shelter at former inspection station

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“We are doing something that can help the homeless,” said Johnson, 59. “They need help, I enjoy it, I really do. I want to keep doing it.”

The work has now expanded to 26 agencies, including MIFA, Memphis Child Advocacy and the Dorothy Day House, thanks to a \$110,000 grant from the city's Division of Housing and Community Development.

“The Union Mission has three buildings; Hospitality Hub has two; Door of Hope has three,” said Scott Blake, longtime executive director of Victorian Village Community Development Corp.

“It's a lot of square footage we cover.”

Johnson found his lifeline at the Memphis Union Mission, 383 Poplar. His job is another level of collaboration that started over home-cooked dinners between Blake and Kevin Lewis in the heat of the pandemic last summer in Victorian Village.

“We'd get around the dinner table and talk about what we could do to help out this population,” Blake said.

“We are home to so many homeless facilities and homeless support facilities. They were unable to quarantine. They didn't have the room to quarantine.”

Lewis was new to town and running Empower Employs, a nonprofit with the mission of connecting disadvantaged people to work.

One of the jobs he could offer was sanitizing work with EcoPro Services, a division of Empower Employs.

Blake, who has written grant applications for years for Victorian Village, applied for a grant from the Memphis Division of Housing and Community Development to build a business sanitizing agencies that serve the homeless.



**Scott Blake**

## 'Orleans Station' to bring residents, new retail to Medical District

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“All the equipment and manpower was very expensive for one facility to do, but if we grouped them, it would make a lot of sense,” Blake said.

The work started last fall with a \$44,000 grant from the city’s CARES Act funds, plus a \$12,000 startup grant from the Assisi Foundation.

EcoPro deep sanitizes each facility once a month. It also offers a hotshot team every time there is an infection.

“We go in within 24 hours and do an emergency cleaning,” Blake said.

EcoPro has added six homeless or disadvantaged people to its crew, and with an \$11,000 grant from the Memphis City Council to lease on a van, it also transports them to work.

None of the agencies is billed.

“They clean all our buildings and all our vehicles that we use to take people out to work in,” said Kelcey Johnson, executive director of Hospitality Hub.



**EcoPro deep sanitizes each facility serving the homeless once a month. It also offers a hotshot team every time there is an infection.** (Mark Weber/The Daily Memphian)

## 'Better Jefferson' project emerges from pandemic delay

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“We transport 22-24 people every day. EcoPro inspects all the vehicles. They sanitize all the public restrooms, office spaces, the hotel where we have 25 women staying on Claybrook in Midtown,” Johnson said. “They also do the outdoor areas where the homeless congregate.”

“To me, it’s just one more measure to masking, vaccinating and testing to make sure this community stays safe.”

The sanitizing crew sprays a vapor in the offices that kills the virus that causes COVID-19. Work is now stacked through the end of the year in the division that serves the homeless.

“Since EcoPro was a child of the pandemic, no one really knew what was going to happen,” Lewis said. “We just knew it was a needed service.”

For Clarence Johnson, who makes \$12 an hour, the expansion is job security. It’s also a way to give back to a network he credits for his sobriety.

“It’s a good feeling to share some help,” he said on a Monday, his day off.

“I used to be homeless myself. I used to be an alcoholic. I came all the way through. I’m not drinking, thank God.”

In his 15 years with the community development corporation, Blake has been largely working with developers in the historic district.

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### Victorian Village ‘outcast’ makes a comeback

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“When COVID came along, all those developments really slowed down. We started looking at ourselves, realizing that even though we’ve been very successful with the commercial and residential infill, we really hadn’t focused on the residential population,” he said.

The connection is underlined by the ties Victorian Village had to the yellow fever epidemic of 1878.

“A lot of the sisters that were here teaching at St. Mary’s girls school actually started serving as nurses during the yellow fever epidemic. Four died along with two priests. It was a lot like COVID, you can contract it and be dead in a week,” Blake said.

“They didn’t know what caused it. They thought it was a miasma,” he said.

People who couldn’t get on a train and get out of town started moving to higher ground. One of the highest points in the city was Victorian Village.

“It’s good to be able to go in and do something that serves an incredible number of people, in the thousands every month.”

## TOPICS

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### **Jane Roberts**

Longtime journalist Jane Roberts is a Minnesotan by birth and a Memphian by choice. She's lived and reported in the city more than two decades. She covers healthcare and higher education for The Daily Memphian.