

VISALIA TIMES DELTA

Visalia officials call for joint approach on homelessness

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Panelists addressing homelessness at the VisaliaCity Council workshop disagreed on the concept of “housing first” for those dealing with substance abuse problem.

Donna Ortiz, Tulare County Health and Human Services Mental Health deputy director, and Betsy McGovern-Garcia, Self-Help Enterprises program director, said the concept works for those who are without a home.

“Housing makes a difference,” Ortiz said.

McGovern-Garcia said the “housing first” model gets people off the street and gives them a place to go.

Housing first has become a national approach. In some areas, such as Utah, homelessness has been

cut by 91 percent through housing first programs. Most major cities have adopted the housing first model, which doesn’t require sobriety before housing.

Ryan Stillwater, director of development at Visalia Rescue Mission, disagreed, saying those with an addiction need significant additional help. Those who can’t be on the street, housing first may the right path away from homelessness, he said. But that’s not an approach that works for all who are homeless.

“It doesn’t work for those with an addiction problem,” he said. “It doesn’t work for everybody. Hitting rock bottom is the catalyst for recovery. They have to say: ‘I am ready for recovery.’”

Addressing homelessness was the main topic at the day-long planning workshop held Friday. The homelessness panel included nonprofit organizations, law enforcement, county administrators and charities working on the issue. There was also public comment and council ideas during the discussion about homelessness.

During the workshop, those in attendance also spoke about improving the local infrastructure, improving tax revenue and properly spending Measure N funds, the recently-approved tax measure to improve public safety, roads and transportation.

During the panel discussion, Ortiz and McGovern-Garcia spoke about the programs available to those who are without a home. And while they are those who fail to qualify for the programs, there’s resistance to getting them help.

“We will try to get them to the program they need,” Visalia police Lt. Candido Alvarez said. “But there are those who have checked out of society.”

There’s no definite estimate on the number of homeless in the area. According to the latest census, there are 631 homeless people in the county and 344 in Visalia. However, the number could be as much as 1,000, as those who work with the homeless estimate the actual number is much higher than the amount counted. Visalia council member Steve Nelsen said the number is between 750 and 1,000.

Experts use a general rule of three times the number counted during annual homeless counts.

Those who are homeless stay in Visalia because there are county resources. But having more than half of the homeless in the county in one city creates problems.

According to Visalia police, five officers deal with homeless issues. Also, two officers spend 90 percent of their time dealing with issues stemming from homelessness.

Visalia police also reported a 53 percent increase on calls last year for service calls dealing with homeless. Visalia police said it's estimated the department spends about \$1.2 million in resources.

The amount spent didn't sit well with Visalia Councilman Phil Cox.

"We shouldn't delegate this to the police department and the officers and make it their problem," he said. "I don't want to see us spend law enforcement money."

Cox also called for city administrators to use money from different sources to increase resources designated to homelessness.

Nelsen said homelessness is an issue Visalia should not tackle alone.

"This is a county issue and we need county money," he said. "We need to look past our sphere of influence. We need to look past that."

Nelsen said he has already met with county representatives and Visalia should be part of the recently-approved homelessness task force.

Cox also said dealing with homeless will require patience.

"This is a complex issue," he said. "This is an issue that won't be solved overnight."

McGovern-Garcia, summarizing similar comments from others in attendance, said the solution to homelessness will come from cooperation and collaboration.

"We need to work together as a community to put together comprehensive programs," she said.