

VISALIA TIMES-DELTA

The homeless divide: Cities struggle with what to do

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(Photo: Ron Holman)

The divides over homelessness run deep in Tulare County, starting with the way it shows up in daily life.

Shopping carts filled with recyclables have become a familiar sight in Visalia and Tulare. Driving down city streets it's easy to spot tents along highway overpasses or among overgrown oak trees.

Visalia has more than 400 homeless people living in plain sight or tucked away along the St. Johns River, according to the 2017 Kings/Tulare counties Homeless Alliance's Point in Time count.

But while other residents recoil, homeless people like Lee Brooks, who's lived on the streets of Tulare for decades, see callous inaction.

"Why can't I find help here in Tulare? 'Cause Tulare don't give a damn," Brooks said. "They run you from place to place to keep you off the camera."

The Great Divide

Then there's the divide over how even to approach the problem. Visalia and Tulare have taken radically different paths.

Visalia city staff has been aggressive in seeking government funding available for housing and rental assistance. With that money, the city has been able to develop new housing and rehabilitate low-income housing.

But the homeless population is still outpacing Visalia's efforts.

Tulare is a different picture.

While just 10 percent of Tulare County's homeless population lives in Tulare, the estimated 109 homeless men and women there are mostly without shelter in the freezing and scorching Valley seasons.

Last year, the city allocated — \$25,000 of a \$40 million budget — to homeless projects and it has gone unspent. Council members have yet to decide what to do with it.

Those on the front line of the issue say underlying problems like scarcity of housing and restrictive government funding need to be solved first.

Tulare Mayor Carlton Jones disagrees.

Instead of housing, he wants the city to focus its efforts on building partnerships with local agencies. A step they have taken with Family Services of Tulare County.

"[Low-income housing] doesn't fix the problem," Jones said. "It's not about having a place to live."

Even if the city provided housing, without supportive services the issues would still be there, he added. Supportive services include alcohol and drug counseling, mental health services, case management and vocational counseling.

Visalia

Visalia, the county seat, has become the epicenter for the homeless problem in Tulare County — accounting for nearly half of the homeless population.

Visalia is doing what other cities in Tulare County aren't — taking tangible steps toward managing the homeless. This includes creating a police unit solely dedicated to responding to homeless calls for service and a workforce program for homeless.

"We can't turn our heads from this," said Visalia Councilman Bob Link, during the city's annual strategic planning workshop last month. "This issue is growing every single year. We can't just say, 'Let the county take care of it.' We need to take an aggressive stance."

Much of what the city is doing revolves around housing and supportive services.

Roughly \$500,700 is allocated to case managers and rental assistance per year, according to Rhonda Haynes, housing specialist for Visalia.

Of that money, \$300,000 goes toward rental assistance to house 15 families for two years. Currently, the city is providing funding to house five families and pay case managers from Family Services of Tulare County.

Funding for case managers — \$190,000 — comes from community development block grants, while rental assistance money is provided by U.S. Housing and Urban Development grants.

Additionally, Visalia has invested \$2.5 million to rehabilitate and develop 47 units in the city. Seven units are dedicated to housing homeless, Haynes said.

But during last month's strategic planning meeting, council members questioned how much they are willing to keep spending on the growing homeless problem.

"I would not allocate any additional city funding toward [homelessness]," said Councilman Phil Cox.

Although the city does receive government funding for many of the homeless programs, local tax money in the general fund also is being used. Cox opposes that.

He did want to continue to develop partnerships with county agencies and nonprofits but wasn't in support of allocating additional funds for homeless projects.

"Until you can provide one-on-one services, I don't think the money would be well spent," he said. "[Homeless people] don't need free housing, they need assistance."

Councilman Steve Nelsen said the city should wait to see how what comes of the current programs in place.

Mayor Warren Gubler agreed.

"I think we're doing a lot of good things," he said. "We just have to continue to pursue those programs that are successful for us."

One partnership that has proven successful is between the city and Self-Help Enterprises, a nonprofit that works to build and rehabilitate affordable homes in eight Valley counties.

Building partnership

Since 2014, staff with Self-Help has integrated housing for homeless into their mission plan. Visalia has been an "extremely patient" partner during the process, said Betsy McGovern-Garcia, program director for Self-Help.

More recently, Self-Help rehabilitated a five-unit complex on Strawberry Street. Two of the apartments were used for permanent supportive housing for homeless, McGovern-Garcia said.

"We connect with agencies when developing these projects. We are very intentional with the services offered," said McGovern-Garcia. "It's intended for folks to be successful."

Agencies such as Community Service Employment Training and Turning Point provide supportive services for the tenants who occupy these units, McGovern-Garcia added.

But these projects take time to develop. They also take a lot of money, which comes from multiple funding sources and partnerships.

McGovern-Garcia said the costs depend heavily on government policies and the specific project.

"If I were to provide a range, it would be so broad that it would be meaningless," she said.

Since the agency first shifted focus to serve the homeless, McGovern-Garcia said the Strawberry rehabilitation is the only project to be completed in Tulare County.

The city and Self-Help have developed several low-income housing developments throughout Visalia, but the number of units dedicated to homeless is minimal.

The city now is working closely with Self-Help to rehabilitate a property on Encina Street. The project would house the chronically homeless and mentally ill homeless.

Rhonda Haynes, Visalia's housing specialist, said the city allocated roughly \$500,000 to the \$750,000 project.

McGovern-Garcia said Self-Help's relationship with Tulare has been "less robust." There have been no housing projects for the homeless developed in Tulare.

Tulare

Despite having a lower homeless population, Tulare has the highest rate of unsheltered homeless.

This means more than 80 percent of Tulare's homeless are living on the streets rather than in shelters or on someone else's couch, according to Kings/Tulare Homeless Alliance's Point in Time count.

This is a problem with no foreseeable solution.

Staff at the Lighthouse Rescue Mission, a religious-based nonprofit that is Tulare's only homeless shelter, said efforts are hampered by limited funding.

"Sometimes it's overwhelming," said Executive Director Irma Briseno. "When you have an empty room, you feel less trapped because you have something to offer. But when you're full and they call, you already know your answer is going to be 'no.'"

The rescue serves approximately 130 women and children annually. Board President Ray VanBeek said the nonprofit is working toward building a facility to serve men and families.

"We want to broaden our scope of need," he said. But again, that takes money.

Even with such limited services, there are homeless people who say they are better off living in Tulare than going to Visalia.



Julie Bradshaw, 46 and homeless for most of her life, talks about her living conditions in Tulare on Thursday, February 22, 2018. (Photo: Ron Holman)

"They have nothing here," said Julie Bradshaw, who has lived on the streets of Tulare for 20 years. "But Visalia is too far and I'm used to being here. I know the people here."

With a lack of supportive housing and a shortage of case managers, those who live in Tulare find themselves in limbo.

"[The city] needs to do more," Bradshaw said. "There's a lot of homeless people out here and it's cold. We don't get no blankets. There's no one that's willing to give us anything."

Sometimes to keep warm at night, Bradshaw will roam the streets.

Asked what, if anything, the city could do for the homeless, Bradshaw responded, "I don't think the city will do anything."

Taking the first steps

Tulare city officials say they recognize there is a problem. They also say the city is part of the solution — in a limited way.

Mayor Carlton Jones said the issues facing the homeless are vast and providing the right services is key.

The city has partnered with Family Services to provide the agency with three housing grants totaling roughly \$212,000 per year.

The money is used to provide long-term rental assistance and case management services to individuals and families who have been chronically homeless due to disabilities, mental health problems and substance abuse, said Margie Perez, Tulare's housing and grants specialist.



Debris collects around some areas where the homeless camp in Tulare on Thursday, February 22, 2018. (Photo: Ron Holman)

The city has been working to develop partnerships like the one with Family Services to provide support to homeless, Jones said.

The city also partners with is Kings/Tulare Homeless Alliance. Last year, council members voted to allocate roughly \$10,000 to the agency's Point in Time count.

The council designated another \$25,000 to assist homeless services, according to Councilman Jose Sigala.

Council members discussed giving the money to the U.S. National Guard armory on Cross Avenue to staff the center during extremely cold nights or hot days, a service homeless say the city is in desperate need of.

But Sigala said the council hasn't agreed on the best way to spend the money and is seeking public input.

If the money is not spent by the end of the fiscal year, June 30, it can be rolled over.

In the past, the city council was resistant to addressing the homeless issue. One of the reasons Sigala ran for a seat was because he said nothing was being done by Tulare officials.

More than a year into Sigala's term, the city still struggles to make significant changes.

"Trying to tackle this issue has been a challenge," Sigala said.

The divide in Tulare County, with cities taking different approaches, is familiar to experts addressing the issue on a massive scale.

Brenda Wiewel, director of USC's Initiative to Eliminate Homelessness, is most familiar with the Los Angeles area.

"We are facing exactly the same issues but on a bigger scale because the area is bigger," she said.

Los Angeles has the second largest homeless population in the U.S., according to HUD's 2017 Annual Homeless Assessment Report.

Wiewel said it's true that having cities work together is incredibly important in decreasing the growing population.

And like Tulare, some cities are hesitant to address the issue head-on.

"We have 88 cities in the Los Angeles County area. The city of Los Angeles is all in on housing, siting, changing zoning and regulations to facilitate new development ... but most of the smaller cities just try to ignore or avoid or close their borders to [serving homeless]," she said. "The county as a whole is fielding teams, services, and trying to do housing wherever possible, including county unincorporated areas as well as cities that will allow."

This is the second article in a series looking at homelessness in Tulare County. Next: One man's journey through homelessness.