THE FOOITHILLS SUN-GAZETTE

Visalia pilot program begins signing up property owners to accept vouchers; Self- Help project would provide six units for homeless

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By: Reggie Ellis

VISALIA – The City of Visalia made great strides in addressing homelessness within the city limits last year. The police department launched a specialized unit to respond to calls regarding the homeless. The city started a work program to provide paying jobs for homeless people who qualify. And the city is part of a countywide task force to find solutions to the issue.

The city has even contracted with Family Services of Tulare County to oversee another pilot project called Tenant Based Rental Assistance (TBRA). The program not only provides subsidized housing for those without homes for up to two years but also provides them with support services to address the other factors of being homeless. The problem is finding property owners who are willing to provide transitional housing for those who are homeless.

The program struggled early in the year because property owners were unwilling to rent units at the prices being offered through the program. City staff was able to qualify the program for a higher rental standard increasing the monthly offering from $873 to $990 for a two bedroom apartment, for example. This allowed Family Services staff to find four local property owners to sign up for the program and begin talks with four more.

Self-Help Enterprises, a non-profit housing rehabilitator and builder, is working on a project that would provide six more housing units for permanent supportive housing of homeless people. Last year, the City Council approved the use of $434,000 of its HOME funding from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) to pay Self-Help to convert the six-unit housing complex at 515 to 527 N. Encina St. into low-income and transitional housing.

Self-Help identified a significant amount of lead based paint in kitchen cabinets, window sills, bathroom doors and bedroom closets, during its inspections. "In order to remediate this environmental concern, SHE will need to either fully encapsulate the [lead based paint] and install features that will prevent future chipping, or in some locations fully demolish and remove the items containing LBP," Self-Help stated in a letter to the City requesting an additional $100,000 for the project to remove the paint.

The City Council approved a $100,000 loan from its Housing fund to cover the cost of removing the lead based paint, bringing the total cost of the project to more than $736,000. Self-Help will pay back the loan at zero percent interest for the next 55 years. Upon completion, the Encina Street properties will all be available for the Homeless Alliance's placement of homeless people.

During their stay in subsidized housing, Family Services provide critical client-focused supportive services such as case management, counseling, emergency assistance (i.e. food, clothing, furniture, hygiene products, etc.), financial literacy/life skills workshops, transportation assistance, and information and referral to program participants. Each Supportive Housing participant works with their assigned Case Manager to create an Individual Service Plan aimed at addressing their physical, mental and emotional wellbeing, and personal goals toward self-sufficiency.

Earlier in the meeting, the City Council also directed staff to maintain much of its state and federal grant funding for housing toward helping the homeless for the 2018-2019 fiscal year. In preparation for its annual HOME and Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) funding plan in May, the Council said it would commit another $299,127 to the Tenant Based Rental Assistance Program in 2018, which will provide monthly rent payments for 20 homeless people for the year.

The Council also agreed to provide $25,575 for its homeless voucher program, $17,000 for homeless services such as population counts, and $40,000 to street outreach for 24 homeless people and case management for 17 homeless.