

# THE SUN-GAZETTE

---

## Cost of homelessness is \$6.4 million in Visalia

October 17, 2018

By: Reggie Ellis

VISALIA – The human cost of homelessness far outweighs the monetary cost of dealing with its side effects on city services. The seriousness of the condition can be measured by the amount of money being spent to cure it. In Visalia, homelessness is a \$6.4 million problem.

From Visalia Police Department's Homeless Outreach & Proactive Enforcement (HOPE) Team to putting grant dollars to work on housing projects, the City of Visalia continues to spend considerable time, money and effort to help individuals experiencing homelessness and the related impacts.

About 58% of Tulare County's homeless are in Visalia, followed by 25% in Porterville and 15% in Tulare. Eleven percent are children under the age of 18 and just about 5% are veterans. The vast majority of them are white (79%) males (61%) between the ages of 25-54 (61%). The Point In Time survey indicated the city's homeless population was 462 this year, but the report is also quick to point out that estimating the actual number is difficult. The survey, conducted by the Kings/Tulare Homeless Alliance each January, relies heavily on the number of people on the housing waiting list, currently about 450 people, but the real number could be as high as 1,400 people.

"There are many versions of homelessness and while the numbers and circumstances may vary, the situation of those experiencing homelessness in Visalia is very real; their living situations often impact their mental and physical health and often lead to dire situations," shared Leslie Caviglia, Visalia's Deputy City Manager. "Likewise, the community is dealing with the visual blight and health and safety issues that are associated with a large number of unsheltered people."

At its Oct. 1 meeting, the City Council received information from multiple City Departments, as well as from Tulare County Supervisor Amy Shuklian and Tulare County Health & Human Services Agency Director Jason Britt who provided a presentation on County outreach and programs along with a presentation by the Kings Tulare Homeless Alliance.

"The City has not sat by and watched," added Caviglia. "Nearly every department is involved with people experiencing homelessness in our community. Virtually every police officer, fire fighter, park maintenance worker, solid waste driver, code enforcement official and others work with the homeless frequently, if not daily."

With a panel presentation, highlights of the discussion included:

- VPD: Since the inception of HOPE Team in 2017, there have been 9,202 transient related calls for service. The four HOPE Team officers have handled 44% of those calls with a focused outreach community stakeholders to identify long-term solutions to chronic homeless issues by providing mental health resources, substance abuse resources, housing placements and more. While 90% of homeless people contacted refuse services, HOPE officers have still been able to make 48 housing placements, 40 of which are still housed, and reconnect 15 people with their families outside of the city limits. VPD also initiated the Trespassing Enforcement Program (TEP). Property owners who sign up for the program authorize officers to enter private property without a warrant when they receive calls of trespassing, many of which are homeless people. Property owners are also required to put up signs with specific wording provided by the department's program. More than 400 property owners are signed up and that has resulted in 253 arrests for trespassing.
- Code Enforcement: Police officers are not the only officers dealing with the homeless issue. A total of four Code Enforcement officers spend approximately 80 hours a week working on public complaints as they build relationships with the homeless community, for an annual cost of \$178,000. "This has had an impact on their ability to be proactive on other violations in their assigned areas," said Tracy Robertshaw. Personal property found throughout the city is stored for 90 days to allow the opportunity for individuals who are experiencing homelessness to reclaim their items. These duties are handled by a part-time employee who costs \$15,000 per year. Disposal of the unclaimed items costs about \$3,000 per year.

- Finance: The Finance Department's Housing Division uses allocated state and federal funds to support the acquisition, rehabilitation and rental of properties through community partners Family Services and Self-Help Enterprises, Inc. Matching funds and processing time for the \$3.5 million in funding costs the city about \$600,000 per year in staff time last year.

- Public Works: Perhaps more than any other department, homelessness put Public Works to work. The department spent approximately \$15,000 dealing with debris left in city waterways. The money funds a part-time employee for 1,000 hours each year to clean up homeless related issues in parks, trails, and waterways. Every month work crews remove 20 tons of debris from waterways which costs an estimated \$8,000 to clean up and dispose of.

In addition to that, the city spent \$11,000 to contract for outside services to clean up large camps and debris as well as make repairs. Debris left in City waterways continues to be a problem and clean up and disposal costs come in at approximately \$8,000 per month. In all, Public Works estimates it spends \$370,000 per year addressing homelessness.

- Solid Waste: The Solid Waste Division fields calls weekly regarding individuals sleeping and defecating in trash enclosures, as rummaging through trashcans continues to be a problem. More importantly, the department is employing many of the people that used to be causing problems on the street. In 2017, the City Council authorized the creation of the Environmental Cleanup Opportunities (ECO) Project. ECO focuses specifically on unemployed individuals who are experiencing homelessness to assist with getting them the documents to be job ready, be reintroduced in to the work force and gain job skills. Forty people went through the program in 2017-18, 16 people became employed, six of whom are still employed with the department. During the program, the city also helps them obtain documentation needed for employment.

Solid Waste spends \$182,000 per year to fund half of the program with the other half coming from the Workforce Investment Board.

## **Homeless Health**

Jason Britt, director of Tulare County's Health and Human Services Agency (HHS), said the county offers an expansive safety net for people struggling with homelessness. They provide food through CalFresh and WIC, cash and assistance through CalWORKS, and access to health care through Medi-Cal.

HHS spends about \$4.4 million on housing for the homeless through a variety of programs. More than half of that was spent on mental health transitional and permanent supportive housing which provided 123 beds between four facilities and helped 176 people. More than \$1.8 million provided some form of housing assistance to nearly 4,000 homeless families while 36 youth received a form of housing assistance through Child Welfare Services Independent Living Rental Assistance program.

HHS is already planning to expand on its programs for the homeless and add an additional \$2.1 million to its annual investment. This month, the agency began its Homeless Outreach Pilot program where mental health counselors will respond to calls along with members of the VPD's HOPE Team (see story on page A1.) They will also spend \$906,358 to initiate the No Place Like Home Program and \$309,000 in additional outreach and treatment programs for homeless people suffering from mental illness. HHS plans to increase its housing vouchers for homeless people with disabilities by \$342,776 and \$582,092 to connect homeless adults with disabilities to services by next month. Last month, the Tulare County Board of Supervisors had its first discussion on contributing \$50,000 toward a Landlord Mitigation fund to reimburse landlords for issues that might arise from renting to homeless people they consider "high risk clients." The county is also working with Kent State University on a project to study where homeless people stay without shelter to determine how to better bring services to them.

In July 2017, Britt and HHS took point on forming the first countywide task force on homelessness and held its first Homelessness Summit last October. In July 2018, the county announced the hiring of its first homeless program coordinator in Charles Felix for \$93,454 annually. Prior to coming to HHS, Felix worked on homeless initiatives within the Los Angeles County Department of Public Health, including evaluating the effectiveness of legal measures to control tuberculosis in homeless shelters throughout Los Angeles County, and utilizing geographic information system technology to contextualize skid row and the experience of the homeless and other vulnerable populations.

## **Alliance Assistance**

In addition to coordinating programs with the City of Visalia, Felix also coordinates with the Kings/Tulare Homeless Alliance. The Alliance serves as the bi-county region's Continuum of Care on Homelessness (CoC). Each region must have an operational CoC in order to receive funding for homeless housing and services through the US Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) and the State of California's Housing and Community Development Department (HCD). Since 2008, the Alliance has secured \$17 million for homeless housing and service providers in Kings and Tulare Counties.

The Alliance has also developed a Homeless Management Information System, a database that holds approximately 25,000 client records to create unduplicated count of homeless people, to understand how people on the street access services, and measure the effectiveness of those services. As part of its strategic 10-year plan, the Alliance also developed a coordinated entry system called Every Door Open (EDO). Families with any sort of housing crisis can enter the system by simply calling 2-1-1 and then be evaluated through a common assessment tool: the Vulnerability Index Service Prioritization Decision Assistance Tool (VI-SPDAT). The Alliance then assigns each family a housing navigator who issues referrals based on program eligibility.

In a partnership with faith based organizations called LINC (Local Initiatives Navigation Center), the Alliance serves as a one-stop center that offers wrap-around services for people experiencing homelessness. The project operates weekly on Tuesdays from 1-4 pm at the St. Paul's Episcopal Church in Visalia. In all, the Alliance has helped more than 9,300 people in Kings and Tulare counties by creating 393 new permanent housing beds. About 89% of those helped are able to remain housed through homeless programs. Those efforts have resulted in a 12% reduction in the number of people reporting homelessness.

### **Next Step**

City staff asked the Council to provide direction on whether they would like staff to pursue either an expanded clean-up program to address the solid waste and debris that is being dumped on public lands, and/or a sheltering program in partnership with local agencies.

On a 4-1 vote, Council directed staff to return with information on both an expanded clean-up program and what a sheltering program could look like.

City staff will now prepare additional information for Council review at an upcoming meeting.