

VISALIA TIMES-DELTA

210 Forum will focus on solutions for people experiencing homelessness in Tulare County

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By: Paul Hurley

When the Tulare County Voices @ 210 planning team decided last month to postpone our forum on homelessness, we could have had no idea how timely that decision would be. As it turned out, the forum "Homelessness: Where Are We Now?" will be one day after a scheduled groundbreaking of a low-barrier navigation center for the unsheltered in Visalia.

The forum will be 7 p.m. Tuesday at 210 W. Center Ave. Nearly all of the local experts on the issue who agreed to participate last month will attend. Doors open at 6:30 p.m.

The rescheduling of the forum proves doubly serendipitous because the groundbreaking of the navigation center not only represents a milestone in Visalia's approach to homelessness, it illustrates the point of the forum: Our communities are seeking new strategies to address the homeless issue. The objective of any strategy is to get people off the streets, to be sure. But the approach to homelessness has become more nuanced. Even the use of terminology is changing. Those who have been planning the navigation center prefer to use the term "unhoused" in an effort to change people's perspectives and avoid stigmas.

The contemporary approach is that we must find a way to live with the homeless, who are best served when their needs are met. In some cases, their immediate needs include food, medical care, warmth, clothing, child care, and the means to make a living.

That is one of the purposes of the new navigation center, which is another term that our community had not heard until about three years ago.

For our forum on Tuesday, TC Voices @210 has assembled:

- Adrienne Hillman, Salt + Light
- Brian Malison, TC Hope
- Cisco Bergen, The Warehouse
- Miguel Perez, Kings/Tulare Homeless Alliance
- Tom Collishaw, Self-Help Enterprises

We will also have members of the Visalia Police Department's HOPE [Homeless Outreach and Proactive Enforcement] team on hand to describe the department's approach to unsheltered people.

The HOPE team is a good example of how the community's approach to homelessness has changed. Law enforcement is often the first point of contact with the homeless population.

The low-barrier navigation center is being developed in part as a response to the lack of options for police. A court has ruled that communities must allow the unhoused to inhabit public spaces, such as parks if they lack alternative "low-barrier" housing options. "Low-barrier" refers to shelter that has

no strings attached, such as requirements for sobriety. That meant, for instance, that police could not move people out of parks. With a low-barrier navigation center, police will have a tool for enforcement.

That is not all that the navigation center will accomplish. The center will provide transitional shelter, access to health care, employment referral services, counseling, child care, nutrition, and a host of other services. It is being built at North Court Street and Glendale Avenue with a combination of government grants and private donations. TC Hope is a nonprofit, grass-roots agency that has spearheaded the development. Community Services and Employment Training (CSET) is the non-governmental agency with the lead. City of Visalia, Kaweah Health and local churches and service groups are among the sponsors.

Many other efforts and agencies are working to serve the homeless.

- The Warehouse and the Visalia Warming Center are creating temporary shelters for homeless people and connecting people with the services that might lead to permanent solutions.
- Salt+Light, the agency based in Tulare, is providing immediate needs for the homeless while pursuing plans for temporary shelter in Goshen in partnership with Self-Help Enterprises.
- The Kings/Tulare Homeless Alliance is associated with the nationwide Continuum of Care movement. It compiles data and connects agencies with state and federal funding.

As the composition of the panel of our forum illustrates, our communities are pursuing multiple strategies. They recognize the realities of homelessness. The first is that every homeless person is unique. The second reality follows the first: There is no one thing that we as a community can do to reduce homelessness. It will take an approach as varied as people themselves.

Which leads us to our conversation on Tuesday: Be prepared to hear myriad stories. Be prepared to contribute your own story. And then we should all be prepared to listen, learn, contribute and be ready to take action to make our community better.

Join the community conversation.

Paul Hurley is retired community conversation editor for the Visalia Times-Delta.

How to attend

Tulare County Voices @210 will conduct a forum at 7 p.m. on April 11 at 210, 210 W. Center Avenue, titled "Homelessness: Where Are We Now?"