

THE SUN-GAZETTE

Visalia community joins forces to navigate new homeless shelter

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Several Visalia community members, governmental agencies, nonprofits join forces to create a low barrier homeless shelter

VISALIA – After years of searching for a solution to the statewide homelessness crisis, Visalia community members followed their passion and found a way to mitigate and help individuals experiencing homelessness in their city.

Tulare County Hope (TC Hope) and Community Services Employment Training (CSET) hosted a groundbreaking ceremony for the Visalia Navigation Center, on April 10. It will be a 100-bed, low-barrier facility with wraparound support services for people experiencing homelessness. The center's property site is on Glendale Avenue and Court Street in Visalia. The road to get to this point has not been easy. It has been met with speed bumps of financial concern, finding the right property, community strife and reevaluating funding after the pandemic.

“There were so many formidable barriers. Cost being largely the biggest but also just an appropriate site that would allow for there to be easy access by the homeless to this location” Brian Malison, Vice President of TC Hope said.

Malison said this whole project began a few years ago with two men who had an idea to create a navigation center similar to one that can be found in San Luis Obispo. The group expanded and ultimately in 2020 became TC Hope, a 501c3 non-profit. In 2021, the group formalized their

relationship with Community Services Employment Training (CSET), where they would be the operating manager of the project and would then help in the creation process.

TC Hope had been looking for a property for their project and had been struggling to find anything. It bounced around the city council for a while, but until CSET's executive director Mary Alice Escarsega-Fechner put the group in touch with Self-Help Enterprises, they were at a standstill. Self-Help had a property that was "by-right" to be used for low cost housing or first home operational purposes for those who are transitioning off the street. It was just the partnership TC Hope needed according to Malison.



"That then provided the open door for us to be able to have a location. [Then] the pieces were coming into place," Malison said.

Before that discussion with CSET, the city had struggled making the decision as to where a shelter could be placed. However, because this piece of land was "by-right," there was no traditional permitting process which would normally involve dealing with the city. As a result, the city of Visalia has had little to do with the planning of the project. Visalia mayor Brian Poochigian said the city did what they could but they are not involved with the project. Malison said once the project had a property, then the city came into play. He said the city helped them find grant monies and other monetary aids to help them get the project rolling.

"We began to work very closely with [Visalia city manager] Leslie Caviglia, identifying the different funds available, state and federal funds for both construction and operational costs," Malison said. "And that's essentially where we are today."

In fact, according to Malison they are still in the process of filing for grants and responding to different opportunities. He also mentioned the need to fundraise themselves to cover a portion of both construction and operational costs.

According to Escarsega-Fechner, the project was scheduled to break ground in December 2022. However the request for proposals (RFP) came back at a much higher amount than they anticipated. Escarsega-Fechner said they then worked with their partners to bring the cost down from almost \$14 million to \$11.6 million.

“I think COVID as well as some of the logistics with all the different supplies was really expensive,” Escarsega-Fechner said. “So we went back to the drawing board with the architect as well as the construction...and worked with them to really look at what we could do within a certain amount of money.”

Several community members are excited about this new endeavor. Supervisor Amy Shuklian has been the chair on the Tulare County Task Force on Homelessness. She said this is truly a representation of what a community can do when they come together to solve a problem.

“It’s pretty incredible the process. There are quotes about ‘see what a community can do when they come together,’ just the normal citizens, see what they can do. And this is what they can do,” Shuklian said. “You just have to have the passion and the will and good people backing it. And that’s what that’s what they did.”



Construction on the Visalia Navigation Center will begin soon, and is estimated to be completed in Spring 2024. The estimated construction costs are \$11.6 million and the estimated annual operating costs are \$1.5 million. The need for a low-barrier facility in Tulare County is dire, and the project is being funded primarily by Federal and State grant dollars, as well as local philanthropic support. According to a 2022 Kings/Tulare Homeless Alliance Point in Time survey, there are an estimated 922 individuals in Tulare County experiencing homelessness, and an estimated 469 unsheltered individuals in Visalia alone. The community’s existing shelters are at capacity and many individuals and families are being turned away and unable to access safe, secure, temporary housing.

Miguel Perez, executive director for the Kings/Tulare Homeless Alliance said the goal is to work with individuals and help them reach their end goal and work with them on their long term goals. This

navigation center allows the homeless alliance to have a place where their workers can remain connected with these individuals.

"I say this as a representative for the agency that I work for, I say this as a community member...I think this investment that we're making as a community is going to be beneficial for the entire city and for everyone," Perez said. "I think it's going to make our city safer, and it's going to make it a better place to live."

The Visalia Navigation Center will be a low-barrier, service-enriched living facility focused on guiding residents into permanent housing. Based on the national Housing First approach, the "low-barrier" aspect removes common barriers to entry, including a resident's need to bring partners and/or pets, store personal possessions, or adhere to religious beliefs. The "navigation" aspect of the center refers to the presence of case managers to connect residents to supportive services. On-site resources will include beds, showers, laundry facilities, meals, phone/mail services, animal kennels, storage space and parking. On-site services will include employment training, health services, substance abuse and mental health services, and connections to permanent housing opportunities.

"I think having access to a navigation center and having access to additional beds that will be able to provide housing, as we work on a long term housing solution [which] has been a dire need in our city," Perez said.

Upon completion of the project, a neighborhood council will be established to provide feedback and ongoing dialogue between the center and the surrounding neighborhood and community. For more information on the Visalia Navigation Center, the neighborhood council or to donate to the project, visit tchope.org.