

THE SUN-GAZETTE

Tulare County supports homeless with ongoing services

May 9, 2023

By: Maddi Langton



The board of supervisors receives an update on the county's Task Force on Homelessness, the homeless multidisciplinary team and related funding sources

VISALIA – Over the past five years, Tulare County has seen over a 20% increase in individuals experiencing homelessness using their response services. As a result, the county announced their plans to continue, increase and improve their own support systems.

On May 2, Tulare County Board of Supervisors were given an update on the county's efforts addressing homelessness from the Health and Human Services Agency. Noah Whitaker, the county's homeless initiatives program manager, included updates on the Task Force on Homelessness, the Homeless Multidisciplinary Team (MDT) as well as related funding sources. In addition to their own initiatives, the county has helped out in cities like Tulare and Porterville as well.

Whitaker said the work the county is doing is only made possible because of the amount of community partners who have come together to make it possible.

"I'd be remiss if I didn't further mention a handful, a handful of community partners we work with on a daily basis," Whitaker said. "Our work would not be possible without the wonderful people in these organizations that are helping build a better future."

In 2016 the board of supervisors created the Tulare County Task Force on Homelessness and since then, the landscape of those experiencing homelessness has significantly changed. The county has

had to keep up with changing legislation, the growth of those experiencing homelessness and find new ways to move toward finding a solution. Whitaker said the county has numerous efforts underway to help individuals transition out of homelessness and into environments which provide better safety and stability. Some of those efforts include the city of Tulare's safe encampment zone, the city of Porterville's Welcome Center, transitional environments provided by Self-Help Enterprises like Eden House, HomeKey projects, the Visalia navigation center and more.

Despite the several options made available, Whitaker said it is still not enough and they are always looking for new ideas and opportunities. For example HHSA's behavioral health branch is currently exploring behavioral health continuum infrastructure to see where the benefits are. Whitaker said the county wide taskforce has been a huge help allowing several minds to get together and discuss solutions.

"We welcome presentations from local service providers, discuss the changing landscape of homeless policy in our state, examine new funding opportunities and welcome discussions around coordination of efforts," Whitaker said.

TULARE COUNTY'S HOMELESS MULTIDISCIPLINARY TEAM

Most recently, the taskforce examined their bylaws and to be more inclusive they designated board seats for the Tule River Indian tribe, the Area Agency on Aging and another to help capture youth voices. Additionally, Tulare County Health Care Centers have been working to connect those experiencing homelessness with same day health care throughout the county. Whitaker said the public health department is also collaborating with the homeless multidisciplinary team (MDT) to establish a mobile medical program.

The county's MDT is almost fully staffed, just recruiting for a clinical social worker. This team works as street and encampment outreach alongside a variety of county partners who are working towards the same goal. HHSA is currently in phase one of a homeless subject matter expert committee according to Whitaker. This committee brings representatives from the wide ranging community partners to "explore opportunities to collaborate, cross coordinate, refer and maximize funding opportunities."

Phase two will include community service providers to help the committee to be successful. Whitaker said his team has engaged with partners to participate in best practice training to help them improve. Some of that includes the cost of poverty experience, trauma informed care, motivational interviewing and ongoing racial equity technical assistance provided through the state.

Tulare County's public health emergency preparedness (PHEP) program was one of only five applicants nationally to receive the water sanitation and hygiene grant or the WASH grant. From that grant, the county was able to create PUSH Packs full of personal hygiene supplies like soap, towels and clothes for those in need. These packs came in perfect timing as the county was able to distribute them to individuals who were displaced from the storms.

An additional support the MDT provides is working across jurisdictions with several partners to help individuals find personal documents and apply for benefits through their enhanced care management team.

"Many of our team members are now certified notaries of the public so that they can execute documents at no additional charge to the unhoused," Whitaker told the board. "It's one of our most popular services."

Whitaker said according to the homeless data integration system, in the past five years there has been a 74% increase in those experiencing homelessness who are accessing a local response system in California. In Tulare and Kings Counties alone, there has been about a 21% increase over the past five years. As a response to the severity of the situation, the California State Association of Counties (CSAC) has advanced an initiative called AtHome according to Whitaker. If the initiative is supported by the state, it will help provide an overall outline for efforts surrounding those experiencing homelessness.

"If supported by the state it will help provide a framework for homeless efforts as well as ongoing funding which is substantial because right now we have no ongoing funding," Whitaker said.

FUNDING

In order for the service providers to have the ability to provide services like showers, substance abuse help and other things Whitaker said they have been utilizing funds through several grants. Some of those grants include funds from Treatment for Individuals Experiencing Homelessness (TIEH), Encampment Resolution Funding (ERF), Projects for Assistance in Transition from Homelessness (PATH) as well as funding from the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA).

Supervisor Amy Shuklian sits on the Task Force on Homelessness and she said it has become a passion for her. She said all their meetings are made available to the public through Facebook live, so not only are those who serve on the task force involved but so is the community.

"The community knows what [the taskforce is] doing," Shuklian said. "[It is so important] having all the partners working together now, rather than in silos. [Before] everybody was doing some good work, but now that we know what each other is doing so much happens in that [meeting] once a month to help progress the effort."