

THE SUN-GAZETTE

Dinuba Community Reflects on City's Homelessness Response

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A homeless person sits on a bench next to his camp at Luis Ruiz Park in Dinuba. (Kenny Goodman)

DINUBA – In January, the Kings/Tulare Homeless Alliance counted 19 homeless individuals in Dinuba.

While those numbers pale in comparison to that of Los Angeles, Fresno or even Visalia, anyone experiencing homelessness stands out in a small-town community of roughly 25,000 people. The city partners with many other agencies to address the situation, but as anyone familiar with homelessness can attest to, it is a complex circumstance without any singular, perfect answer.

“We’re not ignoring the problem. We want to make sure people understand that we are doing all we can to address (homelessness) within the limits of the law and within the limits of the resources that we have,” George Avila, who oversees homeless outreach efforts through his role as interim public works director, said.

The city of Dinuba started the Homeless Outreach Partnership Effort (HOPE) in 2017 to address homelessness within the community. The HOPE team, led by senior code enforcement officer Angelica Molina, works with regional organizations to get people connected to housing services, including the Kings/Tulare Homeless Alliance (KTHA), Tulare County, Self-Help Enterprises and more.

Molina knows every homeless person in Dinuba by name and regularly connects with them to provide hygiene kits, learn more about their personal situation, remind them of city ordinances and talk with them about services they can access. She said that while the city does have some transient people who move through town, most of the homeless people in Dinuba have some sort of tie to the city.

A lot of the transient homeless people who end up in Dinuba arrive because of its position on the Tulare County line, Molina said.

There may be people trying to get to Reedley, Fresno or somewhere else north who stay in Dinuba for a few days before they can figure out how to reach their destination. If someone gets a ride from a sheriff, the sheriff will only take them as far as the county line because that is where their jurisdiction ends, and then the person has to figure out how to continue on to their destination.

Otherwise, Molina said that the people who are regularly living out in the open are from Dinuba or have family who live in the city. Some of the individuals have addiction issues and stay away from their homes when they are using drugs and others may choose to be living outside but have family who provide them with daily meals, Molina said.

“We provide the most basic service that you can give somebody,” Molina said. “I know there’s a stigma that we’re going out there and we’re giving them houses and tents, (but) we’re just giving them a toothbrush and some toothpaste, and for the most part they are grateful for that.”

VARYING PERSPECTIVES

Residents, city employees and community leaders have differing opinions on how widespread homelessness is in Dinuba. Avila said that it can be difficult to speak to what the general perception of the situation is because “that’s subjective, and it really depends on how people see it.”

Homelessness in the wider region is increasing significantly. Between 2022 and 2023, the homeless population across Kings and Tulare counties rose by 16%. According to the KTHA **2023 Point-in-Time (PIT) count**, there were 1,053 reported homeless individuals in the bi-county region on a single night in January.

In Dinuba specifically, homelessness has fluctuated in the last six years. In 2017, KTHA reported 13 homeless individuals, and in 2018 there were 10.

The 2019 PIT count saw a decrease and recorded four homeless individuals, but that number jumped to 23 in the 2020 PIT count, which was conducted in January 2020 before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in the United States.

Data from 2021 is missing because KTHA did not conduct a count that year due to the pandemic. They recorded 25 homeless individuals in Dinuba in their 2022 count, which decreased to 19 in 2023.

Daisy Magallon, who has lived in Dinuba all her life, said she feels that over the last three to four years is when “our homeless population took off.”

“We’ve always had homeless people, but it wasn’t like it was now,” Magallon said. “Everyone knew them, we knew who they were. Now these are all new people.”

Kari Gonzales-Quintana lives in the unincorporated community of Sultana about three miles east of Dinuba. Due to Sultana’s size, Kari-Gonzales-Quintana considers Dinuba to be “her town,” and echoed Magallon’s perception that the homeless population has increased in recent years and that, at the very least, the situation is different than it used to be.

Gonzales-Quintana said Dinuba is a town where “everybody knows everybody,” and if you don’t know somebody, your cousin probably does. She said that previously, everyone knew who the homeless people in town were and other residents or family members would check up on them regularly.

“Over the years we have just gotten an influx of people that we don’t recognize whatsoever,” Gonzales-Quintana said. “These people are all new people that have shown up in town, and the hardest thing is that there are no resources for anyone.”

Magallon said a homeless encampment appeared in her neighborhood this summer after a few people hauled an empty RV into a park area, and she became especially concerned about the situation after it came directly to her door while her 11-year-old son was in the driveway washing cars. The people living in the encampment were walking about the neighborhood, often late at night, knocking on doors to ask for food and money, and some people were trying to break into cars and backyards, Magallon said.

The Dinuba Police Department cleared out the encampment at the beginning of August, but Magallon said she no longer feels safe in her own home.

From the city’s viewpoint, someone is homeless if they do not have a place to sleep with a roof over their head, meaning individuals sleeping in public areas like parks or vacant lots, City Manager Luis Patlan said.

Patlan has worked with the city for about eight years and said he believes that in that time, homelessness in the area has been “relatively stable.” He said the only difference is that more people are congregating in one particular area as opposed to moving throughout town. Instead of seeing one person here or there around town, the individuals grouped together in parks may stand out more.

“Right now, we have anywhere between nine and 11 homeless people that are known to us,” Patlan said. “To me, that is not a serious homeless issue, it’s just that they’re more visible because they’re in one area.”

Similar to Patlan, Molina said that residents may feel like the homeless population has grown more because unsheltered homeless individuals are out in the open more, as opposed to being tucked back in an orchard or less trafficked area.

Molina said that she goes off of how homelessness is defined in KTHA’s annual PIT count, because the city works hand-in-hand with them on responding to homelessness. She added that the number of people experiencing homelessness in Dinuba has often varied from year-to-year, making it difficult to plainly state if it has increased overall.

DEFINING HOMELESSNESS

A PIT count is an annual survey of homelessness in the area conducted by a region's Continuum of Care (CoC), mandated by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). On a single night in January, volunteers locate all of the homeless people they can find and conduct a survey with them to learn more about their situation.

KTHA plays the role of a CoC for Kings and Tulare counties and conducts the PIT count to qualify for federal funding and grant programs.

HUD has very specific definitions of homelessness with different requirements and exemptions depending on an individual or family's circumstance, and those classifications often extend beyond the people KTHA counts in the PIT.

While the PIT count includes both sheltered and unsheltered homeless people, and volunteers spend weeks preparing and locating where most homeless individuals are in the area, it can be difficult to get a fully accurate count.

Many PIT count reports state that there is likely more homelessness in their area than what they have recorded, because they may not be seeing everyone who sleeps outside or in their cars. Not only that, the survey process does not include people who sleep at someone else's house but do not have a home of their own.

"I think my perspective is that there's actually more homelessness than any one of us or any organization — including the city — is really aware of," Mark Isaac, lead pastor of New Life Community in Dinuba, said. "It's a challenge to nail down a specific number of people who are homeless in Dinuba."

Through services provided by New Life Community, a local mennonite church, Isaac is privy to the different challenges community members face with both obtaining and maintaining stable housing. He and Cheryl Jackson, director of the Open Gate Ministries family shelter, hold the viewpoint that homelessness is a much broader concept than many may realize.

Isaac said New Life Community aims to look at the issue of homelessness in a "larger light," because living in shelters or out on the streets is not the only way people experience housing insecurity.

"It's families who are transitioning in their housing situation, or families who may be in jeopardy of being separated because of not having enough beds for their children, or they can't pay the rent," Isaac said.

Jackson said that from the perspective of some entities, a person who is couch surfing at a friend's house or a family who is staying in a relative's house — but not a multifamily household — may also be considered homeless.

The Open Gate Ministries shelter has also seen an increase in demand, Jackson said.

"In the past we would usually always have a room or two not full, but we're full most of the time now," she said. "As soon as somebody moves out, somebody else would be coming in."

ADDRESSING HOMELESSNESS

In response to increased camping in public spaces, the Dinuba City Council first instituted an emergency ordinance in 2022 — and later a permanent ordinance this June — outlining prohibited

activities in public parks, including encampments, but the issue persists as people experiencing homelessness have nowhere else to go.

“We’re constantly working with our local homeless population to try to get them not just services but also the shelter that they need,” Patlan said. “But a lot of times it depends on their willingness to do it. We can’t force them to move out of the city to live somewhere else, we can just offer them the services.”

New Life Community does not have services that house people. Open Gate Ministries, the only shelter in the immediate area, can house up to 34 people at a time; however, they do not accept single adult men or anyone under the influence, leaving a gap in local services for some homeless individuals in Dinuba.

The city cannot force an individual to leave a park if that is where they choose to sleep at night, but the expectation is that people leave during the day and do not set up a camp. The purpose of the ordinance is to keep people from accumulating their belongings in the parks and prevent over-camping, Patlan said.

“We’re stuck in between trying to make (the city) healthy, sanitary and everybody happy with the parks and all of that good stuff, but then still keeping a little bit of humanity to help the homeless and not violate their rights,” Molina said.

Molina acts as the liaison between the city and KTHA to help coordinate Dinuba’s response to homelessness and get people into housing and connected with other resources if they want them.

“It’s all up to the person,” Molina said. “We can do everything we can, but if they don’t want the help, they’re just going to be (out) there.”

KTHA executive director of programs Leticia Hinojosa and executive director of operations Laura Fisher said homeless outreach is multifaceted, and it can take working with someone for a long time before they may feel ready to accept the services that are available.

Fisher said homeless individuals may have been approached by countless people in the past who have tried to help or said they would offer services but have not followed through; so it takes time for individuals to truly trust the person approaching them.

Additionally, for some people, they have to “adjust to the idea that they’re going to be transitioning from what has been their normal for a decade or more,” Fisher said.

“We have people that we work with (who for) decades (have) been experiencing homelessness, and as sad as it is, that’s their comfort zone,” Fisher said. “There needs to be time built in to bridge that gap and work with them to get there.”

Due to these circumstances, a big part of getting people housed involves working with them to ensure “they are going to be able to sustain that transition once they move into the unit,” Fisher said.

Outreach staff from KTHA will work with individuals to build budgets and make sure they know how to do things like take out the trash weekly and pay their bills, because that’s not something that people have to think about when they’re living on the streets, she said.

In addition to building trust, Hinojosa said that accepting services like mental health support can be culturally unacceptable for some, creating a racial inequity in the housing process.

Hinojosa said it also just takes time to motivate someone to change, “whether you’re homeless or not.” Further, she said that services like addiction treatments and mental health counseling do not

necessarily coincide with housing services, and many people don't want those things if they don't come with housing.

"It's not like this black and white discussion," Hinojosa said. "It takes time, and it can take a long time for some folks."

In one move to help with addressing the overall situation, the city and KTHA recently worked on a project with Self-Help Enterprises, a Visalia-based community development organization that builds low-income housing and offers affordable rental units. Through Self-Help, they were able to house nine people from Dinuba last winter.

Getting people housed is an extensive process made more complicated by Dinuba's rural position. In order for the individuals to meet all of the requirements of the housing project and get the documentation they needed, Molina herself drives people into Visalia.

"The city has been really good at allowing me to step out of my box and take them," Molina said. "I'll take them to the county courthouse to get their birth certificates or I'll go drop them off at the DMV to get their IDs when they do want the help."

Individuals do have the option of taking a bus through the Tulare County Regional Transit Agency (TCRTA), but Molina said that many people do not trust that if they do that, they will be able to make it back to Dinuba; so they feel safer if she is the one who takes them. Additionally, many homeless people have pets that they cannot bring with them on public transit, and they cannot leave them behind either.

Molina said that sometimes she'll drive a person with their dog or other city staff members in the public works office building will watch someone's dog while they go get their documents.

LOOKING AHEAD

Magallon said she would like to see the city and the city council do more to address homelessness.

"What really angers me is that they are bringing in more businesses to Dinuba, but not fixing what really matters," Magallon said. "I don't want another grocery store. Fix my town."

She said she feels like the city should spend less time on beautification projects and focus on offering more shelter and more housing.

Gonzales-Quintana said she is noticing a lot of nonprofits offering food and other services to both homeless people and families in need, but added that Dinuba needs "to have some kind of a facility where they've got food, where they've got services."

The public works department got funding in the latest city budget to hire a second code enforcement officer who will be able to support Molina's work, but there is still only so much they can do. Avila said the state of California has shown that the government can't just "throw money" on the issue of homelessness and fix it.

"We are really spending a lot of time and resources on trying to get people the help they need, but we've got limitations," Avila said.

Molina added that donations of supplies from community members are great, but they only help so much, because it's not always what people immediately need. The same is true for entities like KTHA.

“Sometimes what we get are very specific funds that aren’t necessarily addressing issues,” Fisher said. “They’re addressing one issue, but homelessness is holistic, and we need funds that fit into all of the buckets that need funding to fit into in order to address it.”

Further, Patlan said that what gets lost in the discussion is that affordable housing and shelters require multiple layers of funding that developers must secure.

“We’re well aware of the need and we do what we can with our partners, but we don’t build affordable housing,” Patlan said. “We’re in the business of making sure that we have land that’s available, land that’s zoned for it, land that has the infrastructure, sewer, water to accommodate housing. Our job is to make sure that’s available.”

Chair of the neighboring Fresno-Madera Continuum of Care (FMCoC) Laura Moreno explained that in order for expanded social services – to get shelters and affordable housing developers to come to rural areas – there needs to be a provider with the resources and drive to make it happen.

CoCs, including KTHA, are not the entities that directly fund housing projects and services. Instead, they facilitate the distribution of federal and state grants to other organizations.

This means that in order for Dinuba to have increased resources for its homeless population like a shelter or more affordable housing, an entity needs to come in to spearhead a project and develop a strong partnership with the city to make it happen.

But for right now, as the situation stands, community groups are doing what they can to meet the needs that they see.

“I just think it’s a systemic issue and we all have a part in helping our people,” Jackson said. “Nobody’s meant to be on their own. I just think that we all need to do our parts, if we can.”