WESTERN CITY

Visalia is a leader in building new homes, including for farmworkers

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Gillermo Casarez has been a farmworker in Visalia since he was 15 years old. Casarez, now 47, has mostly lived with his parents — eager to live on his own, but unable to afford it. Until now.

In August, Casarez moved into Rancho Colegio, an 80-unit affordable housing complex with 20 units set aside for farmworkers. Rancho Colegio features a free after-school program, adult education and fitness classes, a computer lab, and an outdoor recreation area, along with standard amenities like a laundry room. Solar panels and energy-efficient appliances also help families by reducing utility costs.

Rancho Colegio is one of several new housing developments in Visalia, where the city has issued more than 5,200 building permits since 2017. Photo courtesy of Self-Help Enterprises.

“I am so excited to finally have my own space,” says Casarez, who harvests peaches, nectarines, and prunes. “Rents in the area are so expensive I didn’t know if it would ever be possible.”

Visalia, nestled in the heart of the Central Valley in Tulare County, is an agricultural powerhouse known for its dairy, citrus, grapes, and nuts. The idea for Rancho Colegio was born nearly 10 years ago when a community organization that provided services to farmworkers closed and gifted land to Self-Help Enterprises to build supportive housing and a navigation center.

“They asked us if we would carry on the heritage of their organization to serve the local farmworker community,” says Betsy McGovern-Garcia, the nonprofit’s vice president.

Self-Help Enterprises provided the land and technical assistance to another nonprofit, which opened the Visalia Navigation Center in 2024. The city provided technical and operational assistance, as well as funding for the center. The low-barrier, 100-bed center is designed to help residents transition into permanent housing.

Rancho Colegio, developed by Self-Help Enterprises, opened in March 2026. The nonprofit contracts for property management services and coordinates an array of on-site services. Rancho Colegio is financed through a variety of sources, including $1.3 million in federal HOME

funds from the city, $20 million in equity tax credits, and almost $14 million in state housing dollars.

The city used all its available levers to greenlight the project, says city Planning & Community Preservation Director Paul Bernal. “The fact that it is multifamily, and the number of units proposed, the development was considered by-right, which allowed the project applicant to proceed with submitting their building plans rather than going through the public hearing process,” he says.

Farmworker housing is few and far between and much-needed in California’s Central Valley, says McGovern-Garcia. Tulare County is home to one of the largest agricultural workforces in the nation. According to the California Employment Development Department, the average income for a full-time farmworker in the area is $29,030 to $36,000 a year — well below the income needed to obtain even some subsidized housing.

“Not only is it challenging for farmworkers to find affordable housing since their work is seasonal, [but] it is hard to sign a long-term lease,” says McGovern-Garcia. “Add to that, the housing is often inadequate, as farmworker families often have to crowd together in housing designated for smaller families.”

The need for housing here is acute in general, as the city has grown from 95,000 residents in 2000 to 145,000 in 2023. This in turn has made an already challenging housing market even less attainable for low-income residents, such as the city’s farmworkers.

“As home prices in Los Angeles, San Francisco, and San Diego kept climbing, Visalia stayed one of the most affordable markets in the state,” says Mayor Brett Taylor. “That drew people priced out of the Bay Area and Southern California, especially remote/hybrid workers who no longer needed to live near a coastal job and wanted to live in a larger metro area with all its amenities that retained its small-town charm.”

In response, Visalia has proactively streamlined its entitlement process and sped up its timeline for processing projects. Its efforts are paying off. Visalia has issued over 5,200 building permits since 2017; Rancho Colegio is one of several new housing developments that have sprung up in Visalia in recent years.

“Visalia has always prioritized having sufficient housing stock for our entire community,” says Taylor. “We know the importance of making sure there’s enough housing for our next generation.”

The city has also made sure to develop housing for community members who historically struggle to afford market-rate housing. For example, Visalia is working with Self-Help Enterprises and the Wukchumni Tribe to develop Camino Del Rio on the same property as Rancho Colegio. The first phase of the 94-unit complex will include 35 units for tribal members.

Taylor credits the city's long-term vision, ability to form partnerships, and dedicated staff for its successes.

"Every year building housing in California becomes more and more difficult with additional housing laws being passed," he says. "Visalia works well with our developers who create market-rate housing and our nonprofits to make sure we have housing for all of our community. We are very cognizant that every decision we make affects housing, typically costing more for the end consumer. We have amazing staff that works diligently to be problem-solvers."