

CALAVERAS ENTERPRISE

Multiagency Homeless Task Force forms in Calaveras County

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Homelessness has been a problem for many years, with solutions being few and far between. But now, local agencies have come together because of state and federal financial opportunities, and are working together to cure this growing epidemic.

Within Calaveras County, the issue of homelessness has recently been addressed by a group of concerned agencies and individuals, organized in May by Kristin Brinks, director of Health and Human Services for the county (HHSA).

The group, called The Homeless Task Force, has formed to help brainstorm, procure funding sources and focus on the long-range planning of combatting homelessness in the county by presenting viable and concrete solutions.

California has the worst homeless issue in the country, according to a Housing and Urban Development (HUD) report to Congress. The report stated housing costs are 47 percent above the national average and income is only 18 percent above the national average in California.

The task force is comprised of county departments, including Health and Human Services, Office of Emergency Services, Probation, the Sheriff's Office, the Environmental Management Agency, employment and training providers, faith-based organizations, members of the health care community, the Calaveras County Office of Education, tribal partners and the U.S. Forest Service, in addition to homeless advocates.

A presentation was recently given to the Board of Supervisors from the committee with the current status and plans of what the group has accomplished already and what they plan to do in the future.

In July 2017, under the Mental Health Services Act (MHSA), a transitional recovery program was implemented for severely mentally ill individuals actively engaged in recovery plans. Since opening at the same time, the Vision House – which is a recovery program for severely mentally ill individuals – has housed 12 community members, with eight moving to permanent housing with employment. The task force hopes to continue in this success, and apply for as many programs and funding opportunities as possible.

In Brink's presentation to the supervisors, she explained that homelessness is a multifaceted issue, with a myriad of causes, including loss of employment, lack of affordable housing, drug and alcohol abuse and physical or mental illness.

The lack of homeless shelters has been a long-standing issue in the county, based on data provided by the task force to the board. In Calaveras County, there are 23 emergency and 13 transitional beds available for homeless individuals. Of the 13 transitional beds, five are a part of the Resource Connection's program (of which eight are no longer available, due to lack of funding). These beds are also only reserved for victims of domestic violence. There are five additional beds that are part of the Vision House.

In response to the issue of homelessness in California, Gov. Jerry Brown and the Legislature introduced multiple new funding opportunities in the 2018-2019 State Budget to help individual counties address their unique homeless crisis situations. There are 10 different one-time initiatives and funding opportunities, with over \$748.3 million available. Some of these funding opportunities are available over the course of several years, and the amounts increase by hundreds of millions of dollars.

There are "different levels of implementation, different rules and requirements, different state agencies administering them," Brinks said. "Many of us in the counties are trying to understand each of these; (the) state is trying to navigate how they're trying to administer."

Applications will be submitted in partnership with the Stanislaus Housing Authority (SHA). A project that is already underway by SHA is 20 to 25 units of workforce housing in San Andreas, which are expected to be completed in a year.

In 1995, HUD came up with a new requirement for communities and counties to do a single application in order to streamline the process.

The Continuum of Care (CoC) is a program designed to bring the community together with a goal of ending the homeless problem, provide state and local agencies with the funding to quickly rehouse the homeless, and promote access to needed programs, according to the HUD website.

The CoC requires a consolidated application; therefore several local counties have combined forces to fulfill the requirements. The CoC for Calaveras County is teamed up with Amador, Mariposa and Tuolumne counties.

Each CoC in California is required to do a survey one night within the last 10 days of January to evaluate the current homelessness issue. A survey of the homeless population in Calaveras County in 2016 showed 221 homeless individuals (95 percent unsheltered). The mobilization effort from local agencies and individuals was unusually high that year, since recovery efforts were in place from the Butte Fire.

Brinks said the effort to accurately count homeless individuals was “probably the most accurate count we’ve done in Calaveras County.”

In 2017, there were only 19 homeless individuals counted through the survey.

“The count is only as good as our ability to enlist (individuals) to conduct it,” Brinks said.

There were, however, an additional 157 individuals who reported their status as “couch surfing,” on aid applications, which is not allowed to be considered homeless when reporting to the state. Brinks stated “a poor mobilization effort” in 2017 as the reason for such a low count.

In the year after the Butte Fire, homelessness increased by 10 percent. In the two years prior to the Butte Fire, there were 12 percent and 14 percent increase, respectively. This cites the issue of increasing homelessness as being pre-existing and not significantly affected by the Butte Fire. This past year there was an increase of 8 percent.

According to Lee Kimball with Behavioral Health, who presented the Health and Human Services data during the presentation, there has been a 35 percent increase in homelessness in the past five years among individuals who receive Medi-Cal and CalWorks. The Homeless Task Force wants to identify what has caused the increase.

“The story that is not told in those demographics is the percentage of increase,” said Kimball during his presentation at the meeting.

According to HUD, affordable housing needs to be at least 30 percent of a person’s income (including utilities) to be considered “affordable.” For Calaveras County, this would be \$745 per month, with an income level less than \$35,000, which is 31 percent in Calaveras County, according to U.S. Census data. According to rentdata.org, the average rental price in Calaveras County for a two-bedroom home is \$930 per month, which is considered high compared to the national average. The website states that the fair market rent (FMR) is more expensive than 89 percent of other FMR areas.

Comparatively, the FMR for two-bedroom home in the Bay Area is \$3,121 and \$1,600 in the Central Valley.

Another statistic that was unveiled in the market analysis by members of the task force, is that 32 percent of all housing units in Calaveras County are vacant and not available for rent or purchase. To compare, the statewide average for vacant units is 7 percent.

Jerry Cadotte, executive director of Angels Camp-based Sierra Hope and a member of the Homeless Task Force, attributes part of this high average to vacation and second homes in the Arnold and Copperopolis areas.

District 4 Supervisor Dennis Mills asked if that was presented as a problem.

“We aren’t saying that’s an issue; we’re just making the data and our hypothesis available to your board,” Brinks said. “There’s more to this story, and that’s what we’re bringing to your board today – to address these issues.”

One of the funding sources the task force is applying for is the Homeless Emergency Aid Program (HEAP). Some of the outcomes of the program include emergency housing vouchers, rapid rehousing, emergency shelter construction and more. The application must go through the CoC. The grant is worth \$1.2 million, with \$61,000 dedicated to use for youths. If awarded, the \$1.2 million will be shared among the CoC, consisting of Amador, Calaveras, Tuolumne and Mariposa counties. Calaveras would receive \$300,000, the allotment being based on a proposal written by each county on their needs.

One of the proposed projects for HEAP funds is the Calaveras Homeless Emergency Aid Program (not to be confused with the different HEAP program). The plan for the pilot project is to implement a minimum of nine mobile emergency shelters in three different locations with local faith-based and community-based partners. Some of the community partners include Blue Mountain Coalition for Youth and Families in West Point, Oak Circle Community Church in Arnold, and one more in Angels Camp or another community in Calaveras County.

Brinks also hopes to partner with Sierra Hope in Angels Camp to purchase a building to remodel and convert into 30 to 32 units for housing, with 10 to 12 set aside for veteran housing. The units will be eligible for section eight and Veteran's Affairs Supportive Housing.

"In the full spectrum, (there are) a lot of projects going on," Brinks said, as she addressed the supervisors.

The group has engaged in writing grant proposals and is asking for the commitment from the Board of Supervisors.

There were 10 focus groups held in December in San Andreas, with approximately 90 RSVPs from community members to collect the input of the community on the issue of homelessness.

"The task force members are a dedicated and sharp group, and it's always a pleasure working with them. Navigating through the various state and federal funding requirements continues to be involved, but the commitment from the task force to remain flexible and pursue opportunities to add much needed resources to our community, is strong," Brinks said.

The Homeless Task Force plans to have a completed homeless plan by Jan. 30 and to have it made available for community members to see it.

"We intend to pursue, as a county, every opportunity we can," Brinks said.