

Yolo County homelessness down but more work to be done

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The rate of homelessness is down in Yolo County, but after three years of continuous work, has it decreased enough?

Lisa Baker, chief executive officer for Yolo County Housing, addressed the Yolo County Board of Supervisors on Tuesday, reiterating the initial intentions and current efforts of the "Ten Year Plan to End Homelessness" that was adopted in 2010.

Baker noted that at the inception of the plan, homelessness had increased 20 percent countywide based on a point-in-time count of 491 homeless individuals in 2009.

According to the most recent count, homelessness in the county has decreased by 3.5 percent, which "does show that we have perhaps made some impact on the issue within the county," Baker said.

The primary components of the plan include homeless prevention, affordable housing with a variety of opportunities and services, and unspecified support services. Since the causes and issues that create homelessness are multi-faceted, the plan outlined six major activities that "would be overseen by teams made up of providers within the jurisdictions," according to Baker.

Some of the activities include providing transportation assistance to improve access to services and employment opportunities, identifying and obtaining funds for extremely affordable permanent housing and providing services to access and maintain housing.

Baker was happy to report that during the first three years, this program has made significant progress.

The original plan was adopted with the idea that there would be a director hired to manage it and provide effective administration. However, obtaining funding for this position has been a struggle.

"Unfortunately, because of ongoing budget cuts, pretty much as soon as the plan was adopted, the funding for that was nonexistent," she said

In the absence of a director, an Executive Commission was established to implement and evaluate the plan as it unfolds. The governance of the commission has been restructured recently to include a broader range of individuals including elected city officials and consumers.

One of the main issues in question by Supervisor Matt Rexroad revolved around the creation and expansion of housing resource centers in the area. Under the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, Yolo Family Resource Center received \$1.6 million for homeless prevention and so-called "rapid rehousing" in each of the cities and in the county, helping the center and its partners serve 1,733 individuals. Baker reported that the funds from this act have ceased and there are limited grants available to continue the program.

Rexroad pointed out that \$1.6 million is a lot of money and asked for clarification as to how the program exhausted these funds.

Some of the services that were provided were eviction prevention, temporary housing, financial assistance and legal services.

"Part of the 'rapid rehousing' funds were used to help folks either prevent eviction or to go back into housing," Baker said.

One task outlined by the plan is to increase availability and access to mental health and substance abuse services. This includes the development of two transitional homes for a total of eight beds -- four in Woodland and four in West Sacramento.

It has been a bad three years for housing, Baker admitted, attributing a lack of proper program funding as the root cause.

"We think that this lack of funding for affordable housing for extremely low income families is actually the hardest piece for us to reach, nevertheless we've been able to do some new construction through a variety of partners," Baker said.

She noted that the county's Housing Element and zoning requirements are one bright spot toward providing a framework for housing opportunities as has been new construction with the creation of Eleanor Roosevelt Circle, Cesar Chavez Plaza, the rehabilitation of Fair Plaza in Woodland, the construction of Rochdale Grange, New Harmony in Davis and the Esparto family units in Esparto, along with Orchard Park in Winters.

"We've had this plan for three years and it really for the most part seems as if it hasn't gone anywhere," Supervisor Jim Provenza said.

He was comparing that to the Habitat Conservation Plan which has generated a lot of participation and success. "It is amazing the amount we've got done for endangered species, and the amount we haven't gotten done for the homeless... to me it is one of the most important things we should be doing," Provenza said.

The Executive Commission will be meeting on Dec. 19 to evaluate the effectiveness of the ten year plan and whether or not to continue.