

Early stages of homeless pilot project deemed a success



Ryan Collins (in orange vest), coordinator of Yolo County's program to move homeless people from their riverbank encampment in West Sacramento to a motel in that city, talks with encampment residents on moving day. Courtesy photo

By Anne Ternus-Bellamy

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“The Jungle,” they called it: 68 acres of lean-tos and makeshift “houses” on the banks of Coyote Creek in San Jose, a place nearly 200 people called home until last week, when officials in San Jose began clearing out the nation’s largest homeless encampment.

But after more than a year of planning and millions of dollars spent, some 60 of the encampment’s residents still had nowhere to go on Thursday, even as law enforcement moved in to tear everything down, threatening those who remained with arrest.

Media reports described former jungle residents, all earthly possessions heaped into shopping carts, dispersing into the neighborhood around the encampment, with many saying they didn’t know where they would sleep that night.

It was a different scene entirely along the banks of the Sacramento River last month when officials from Yolo County and West Sacramento moved to shut down a homeless encampment there.

So different, in fact, that Yolo County's mental health director, Karen Larsen, called it "one of the best days of my entire life" in a report to county supervisors last Tuesday.

After months of planning, officials on Nov. 12 moved 66 homeless individuals from the North Levee riverbank into a hotel in West Sacramento, where over the next 120 days, they will receive services while the county's housing agency attempts to find permanent homes for each of them.

Regular interaction with the encampment's residents over the past couple of months helped officials get individualized profiles of each of them and of the myriad issues that may have led to their homelessness.

They know who has substance abuse problems, who suffers from physical or mental illnesses, who has pets or other special needs. And they have begun to connect each of them with services.

Ryan Collins, director of homeless services for United Christian Centers in West Sacramento, earned high praise during the Board of Supervisors meeting on Tuesday for his role in making the "Bridge to Housing" pilot project an early success.

It was Collins who led a census conducted in September and October to determine exactly who was living in the encampment. He met each of them, learned their stories and created the kind of trust and cooperation needed to move them into an entirely new environment without the threat of force.

"I call him 'the amazing Ryan Collins,'" said Joan Planell, Yolo County's director of employment and social services. "The first day we went out to the river, I was assigned to Ryan's group (and) followed him around for two hours.

"I went home and told my husband, 'I think I should resign my job and go work for Ryan Collins.' He was so kind, so nonjudgmental to everyone out on the river."

That's not to say the challenge of uprooting all of the encampment's residents would not be daunting.

The canvasses Collins led revealed that of the 71 people found living along the riverbank, 44 had disabilities or chronic illness, 33 had mental health issues and 26 had substance abuse issues.

There were 45 men among them and 26 women and they were, by and large, a middle-aged group. Each had lived there, on average, for 4 1/2 years.

The area, which includes both public and private parcels north of the Broderick Boat Ramp, has been a popular homeless encampment for decades, and law enforcement had attempted to remove the residents many times before, only to have the homeless return.

When property owner Ethan Conrad requested earlier this year that the West Sacramento Police Department remove campers from his property, Police Chief Tom McDonald decided to seek a more permanent solution, spearheading a collaborative approach among agencies to identify temporary and permanent housing solutions for the North Levee homeless.

Thus was born the “Bridge to Housing” project, Yolo County’s first foray into the Housing First model, which aims to move homeless into housing before attempting to address the issues that led to their homelessness.

As the project took shape, all of the residents living along the riverbank were offered the chance to move out of the encampment and into temporary housing for up to 120 days while the city and county connected them to services and located permanent housing. All but five agreed to participate.

On the day of the move, more than 100 volunteers showed up at the riverbank, including dozens of county officials and staff.

After passing through a check-in, each of the 66 remaining residents and their 40 pets began moving through stations manned by the volunteers.

Turning Point Community Program’s staff and volunteers loaded residents’ belongings into U-Hauls to transport them to the hotel. Volunteers from UC Davis and the Yolo County Sheriff’s Department ran an animal services station where pets were vaccinated and micro-chipped and their owners given coupons for spaying and neutering.

“They were very sensitive to how important these pets were to residents,” Larsen said.

A hygiene services station included a mobile eight-stall shower trailer, and residents were given new clothing while their old clothes were taken to be laundered and delivered to them in their new home.

CommuniCare Health Centers and Yolo County Public Health provided health screenings to all of the encampment’s residents and offered both flu shots and Tdap boosters.

Mental health screenings also were provided, while representatives of Yolo County’s Probation Department, District Attorney’s Office and Public Defender’s Office were on hand to help with resolving legal matters.

Several residents, Larsen said, took advantage of the chance to get old criminal cases on the calendar and begin working toward resolution.

By the end of the day, Larsen said, volunteers had moved all 66 people and 40 animals out of the encampment without incident.

“There was a huge police presence,” she said. “A lot of people with guns and badges, but the good news was, we really didn’t need them.”

Three weeks later, Larsen said, “we’ve only lost one resident ... who had to go take care of pending legal matters.”

Sixty-five remain in the program, a fact that astonished several county supervisors.

“If you told me there were 32 people in the facility today and the rest had dropped out, I would have considered that successful,” said Supervisor Jim Provenza of Davis. “I’m just shocked at 65.”

“I was surprised that many stayed,” agreed Supervisor Duane Chamberlain, who represents parts of Woodland as well as much of rural Yolo County.

Larsen said the last three weeks have not been without their challenges, but said participants “have stepped up and done an amazing job.”

They’ve been following the rules laid out at the hotel and even stepped up to handle nighttime security, she said.

“I have been beyond impressed with how they responded to the opportunity offered to them,” Larsen added.

But the hard work continues, all involved agreed.

“(We) don’t want to declare victory today,” said Supervisor Matt Rexroad of Woodland.

The objective, after all, is to get everyone out of that hotel and in to permanent housing over the next three months.

“And we need to do a formal evaluation of how this is going,” said Rexroad, who was one of several county supervisors assisting with the move on Nov. 12 and called it “an incredible day.”

“It was beautiful,” he said.

And it may serve as an example to the nation, Provenza said.

“If we’re successful, there will be people around the state and country looking to us,” Provenza said.

The effort was jointly funded by Yolo County and the city of West Sacramento, with each putting up \$50,000 to cover hotel housing costs.

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