14 FORWARD

Addressing Homelessness

A True Community Effort

"We think sometimes that poverty is only being hungry, naked, and homeless. The poverty of being unwanted, unloved, and uncared for is the greatest poverty. We must start in our own homes to remedy this kind of poverty."

~ Mother Teresa

Preface

14Forward – a collection of 20 sheds and supporting elements that provide temporary shelter to the homeless in Yuba County – is an intriguing approach to address a struggle found across the nation. The project's colorful buildings and carefully planned campus has attracted the interest of the media, homeless advocates, associations, and government jurisdictions from throughout the state and beyond. But the role of 14Forward really needs to be placed into context. This project is simply the newest of numerous projects supporting homeless individuals and families in the Yuba-Sutter region. The other shelter programs in the area have been around for many years and are competently maintained by private and faith-based organizations. A great measure of the success of the 14Forward project is due to the willingness of those organizations to partner with Yuba County and to provide invaluable advice and services.

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Introduction

Homelessness has been a societal challenge for communities around the world for centuries, with numbers that are directly influenced by economic factors and available services. Nationally, the poverty level is 15.6 percent, but Yuba County has 22.2 percent of its population living at that level. For this reason, it is understandable that the region has consistently seen a large number of homeless individuals and families over the years, many of whom grew up locally and struggle with such things as job loss, substance addiction, mental illness and other issues. Beginning in 2014, Yuba County and the surrounding region suddenly saw an explosion in the local homeless population, much of which was precipitated by actions taken in other larger northern California communities to clean out their homeless camps. Many of those displaced by such actions traveled to the Yuba-Sutter region and took refuge in three large existing encampments surrounding the town of Marysville.

The Challenge

By late 2015, local officials and residents noticed that the growing homeless campsites were becoming increasingly visible, as more homeless individuals appeared in neighborhoods and businesses districts. Also, trash and sewage issues along the Yuba and Feather Rivers that had been mostly manageable over the previous decades began increasing so fast that the debris overwhelmed the shorelines. This prompted Yuba County's Health Officer to declare a health emergency, even as environment concerns were voiced over the damage being done to the fragile ecosystem of the waterways.

Area residents wanted immediate action to clear out the homeless encampments and remove the debris that was left behind. Yuba County considered various available options for such an effort, including eviction of camp residents and code enforcement actions against property owners who allowed the encampments to remain and grow. Any action taken by Yuba County, however, had to be performed with consideration of the rights afforded to the homeless. The act of simply clearing out the homeless camps had legal and human implications. Legally, it was very likely lawyers representing the homeless would be able to stop such action and tie up future efforts with court battles. On the human side, Yuba County officials believed that pushing the homeless out with no place to go was not a viable solution.

Best Approach

In early 2016, Yuba County officials began meeting to determine the best approach to address the growing homeless population and quickly realized the need to seek expert advice. A consultant specializing in homeless issues was brought in to assist, and numerous meetings were held to discuss best practices in addressing the needs of both the homeless community and the rest of the county's residents. It was clear Yuba County needed be aware that those who are homeless have very dedicated advocates working on their behalf. The consultant said those advocates would be need to be satisfied that each action taken by the county demonstrated a commitment to the best interests of the homeless. This meant *services for the homeless had to be firmly established and available before beginning any action to close down the homeless encampments*.

Collaboration

Like most communities, Yuba County is bolstered by a variety of service organizations, non-profits, the faith community and homeless advocates that have worked independently and together for many years to address the needs of those struggling in the community, including those who are currently homeless. The expertise of these organizations was vital in developing a plan that would give area homeless real opportunities to move toward permanent housing.

Several entities were invited by the Yuba County Administrator's Office to be part of a new collaboration tasked with creating the framework necessary to address homelessness in the region. By late February, 2016, the new Project Team was set and began meeting regularly, comprised of the following representatives/entities:

- Yuba County Administrator's Office
- Yuba County Board of Supervisors
- Yuba County Homeless Project Manager
- Yuba Health and Human Services Director
- Yuba County Health Officer
- Yuba County Community Development and Services Director
- Yuba County Sheriff's Department
- Yuba County Probation Department
- Yuba County Code Enforcement
- Sutter-Yuba Mental Health Services
- Yuba County Public Information Officer
- Homeless Consultant
- Twin Cities Rescue Mission
- Habitat for Humanity
- Salvation Army
- Hands of Hope
- City of Marysville Police Chief
- California Rural Legal Assistance
- Recology
- Yuba-Sutter Economic Development Corporation

The Yuba County Administrator, the Homeless Project Manager and other county officials also held frequent meetings with other interested groups, including Marysville City Council representatives, City of Marysville legal counsel, legal homeless advocates and, most importantly, homeless camp representatives.

Other partners included:

- St. John's Episcopal Church
- Bridges to Housing
- Marysville Veterinary Hospital
- Regional Housing Authority of Sutter/Nevada Counties

Path to Permanent Housing

Services First – For three months prior to the first action to close down the homeless encampments, an assessment team from Yuba County Health and Human Services conducted several onsite visits at the various camps. The information gathered was used to coordinate services that were ultimately brought to those who participated in the program.

Team members used the visits to meet several goals:

- Get acquainted with the residents
- Gather pertinent demographic information
- Determine income sources
- Assess intervention needs (addictions, mental health, etc.)
- Find out if they have pets
- Determine other special requirements

Type of Action – Yuba County worked through the Project Team, the legal community and local jurisdictions to determine the best approach to close down the various homeless encampments, most of which were located on private property and city owned property around the perimeter of Marysville. Working closely with the city, the county decided to take code enforcement actions, based on the health and environmental dangers that were present on the properties where homeless settlements existed. Yuba County Code Enforcement began working to determine how cleanup actions would commence and who would be responsible for the costs involved with cleanup.

It was also decided that code enforcement actions would take place over the course of several months, to ensure the efforts to provide services were not overwhelmed by the number of people needing them.

14Forward

Meeting a Need – Early meetings with Project Team members helped to establish the framework for the 14Forward project. Existing private/faith-based programs in the community already addressed the needs of homeless families (with children), and there were other programs that specifically assisted adult males or females. When the capabilities of all available services were added up, the Project Team then compared those numbers to the assessments done by the Yuba County Health and Human Services team and determined the closure of homeless encampments would require more shelters for adults.

It was decided that 20 shelters would be needed that could accommodate either singles or couples. A search for a feasible location for the project had to meet numerous requirements:

- Close to resources (residents would not stay at a location that was too isolated)
- Insulated from other residential neighborhoods
- Accommodate one pet per person (if pets not allowed, homeless would not participate)
- Available electrical power
- Nearby showers

Location – Yuba County was fortunate to own a piece of land located within the city limits of Marysville that met the criteria. The property is adjacent to the Twin Cities Rescue Mission, which offered to make its shower facilities available to the 14Forward residents and to provide two meals each day. The Salvation Army offered to bring a third meal to the campus each day.

Construction – The first step was to prepare the site and make certain it was graded for proper drainage. Yuba County worked with regional business Home Depot and its vendor Tuff Shed to construct 20 specially-modified 8'X14' Tuff Shed structures. The units were intended to be strictly emergency shelters and therefore had no electricity and no plumbing. Habitat for Humanity provided the labor and materials to insulate the shelters and our Youth Build Program from Juvenile Hall constructed two bedframes for each unit. Other vendors with Home Depot expressed a desire to participate and provided stone patios and artificial turf for aesthetics.

Other provisions at the 14Forward site:

- Portable restrooms and wash station (rental costs donated by Recology for one year)
- Tuff Shed office with power for services
- Fenced dog run
- Kennels for smaller animals
- Water faucets onsite
- Container to safely store personal effects of residents
- Shade structure
- Accommodations for smoking area
- Picnic tables
- "Camp host" – onsite 24/7 to address needs and request services

Services – An important element of 14Forward is the focus on making vital services easily accessible. The county coordinates with local programs for transportation to medical clinics or other necessary appointments, but actually bringing services to those staying at 14Forward creates a better chance for success. The county placed an office structure at the site that is intended as a place where service can be brought directly to the residents and offered according to a schedule. These services include:

- Document recovery
- Job training
- Substance abuse counseling
- Mental health services
- Housing application assistance

Rules – Each person wishing to stay a 14Forward signs an initial agreement to temporarily stay in a shelter for 21 days. That agreement can be extended up to three times (maximum stay of 84 days). There are rules each person must follow (failure to follow rules may result in the person being asked to leave):

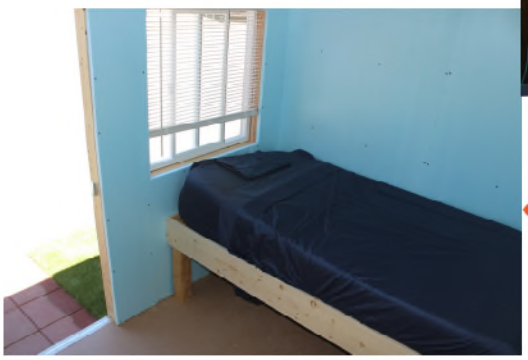
- Must actively work with the social services team to achieve permanent housing
- Must be engaged with the other services provided
- No drug or alcohol use allowed on the campus
- No visitors allowed inside the gate (visits can take place outside of the gates)
- Must adhere to a list of basic rules
- Must respect others at the 14Forward site

Summary of 14Forward Elements

- 20 Tuff Sheds – 8'X14' in size – being used as "emergency shelters"
- Each shelter has two windows in front and one in the back for airflow
- Shelters have no electricity and no plumbing
- Battery/solar/crank-charging lanterns with mobile device charging capabilities are included for each resident
- Smoke detectors and fire extinguishers
- Two bedframes for each unit
- Habitat for Humanity installed wall insulation, shelving, and other features in each unit
- Bedding and pillows were mostly donated by the community and county employees
- Bedbug-resistant mattresses were purchased by Health and Human Services
- Portable toilets and a hand washing station
- Shower facilities and two meals each day are being provided by Twin Cities Rescue Mission
- One meal each day provided by Salvation Army
- One animal allowed per person – dog run onsite
- A shade structure is provided for a common area where smoking is permitted
- A shipping container onsite to store personal belongings – three tubs allowed per person
- Picnic Benches supplied by Habitat for Humanity
- A Hotline phone number and email address were established for homeless seeking services

Costs

Yuba County has committed approximately $150,000 to the 14Forward project, so far. The greatest portion of those costs have come from the purchase of 20 structures at approximately $3,500 each. The Yuba-Sutter Economic Development Agency has also worked to gain donations and corporate sponsorships, offsetting a majority of these costs. A GoFundMe online fundraiser is part of this effort.



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