

Butte County officials, community groups gather for summit on homelessness

Chico Enterprise-Record , by Ryan Olson, posted 04/15/16, 8:50 PM PDT

Oroville >> Officials from all five Butte County cities and county government got a glimpse of the large, ongoing efforts to address homelessness Friday.

At the end of the countywide summit on homelessness at the Southside Oroville Community Center, county Chief Administrative Officer Paul Hahn said the issue was great, but there was a tremendous amount of money, resources and people dedicated to addressing it. He joined others in taking encouragement that leaders from the county's local governments were in attendance.

"That demonstrates an understanding of the importance of the issue and the concern to citizens and residents," Hahn said.

The event was offered as an informational session, for the public and officials to learn what various agencies and groups are doing. There were many different views on the matter, including from behavioral health, social services, hospitals and law enforcement.

While most of the presenters focused on what they were offering, several community groups wanted to begin greater collaboration on effective programs.

Brad Montgomery, director of the Torres Community Shelter, said groups could make more of an impact if there was work toward a united goal. He said local efforts are having an effect, but more needs to be done.

"Our community needs more tools in their toolbelt," Montgomery said.

Michael Madieros, Stairways Programming coordinator, said it was important to remove barriers for people seeking services. Along those lines, he called for establishing a service center with fewer barriers and a harm-reduction shelter, as opposed to the sober shelters common in the area.

Madieros said it was possible to address homelessness now, but the issue could get out of hand in five years. He also noted that many of the people living on the streets are from local communities.

"The longer they stay on the streets, the tougher and more expensive it is to help them," Madieros said.

Officials touted that is often more cost-efficient to address homelessness with housing and treatment instead of solely treating people on the street. As an example, Madieros pointed out that 20 participants in Stairways' rapid rehousing had a total of 600 nights in jail before enrolling. After they enrolled, they stayed out of jail.

Ed Mayer, executive director of the Housing Authority of the County of Butte, noted taking care of a disabled household with housing is \$20,000 a year as opposed to up to \$40,000 if that family was on the street.

Mayer also called attention to the fact that a large number of county residents are struggling to pay household expenses. Homeless families and low-income households are a breath away from each other, he said.

One challenge for finding housing for both homeless and low-income families is a tight housing market. Rental rates are spiraling up as the vacancy rate in Chico dips below 1.5 percent.

Mayer said the communities that have best tackled the issues of homelessness were those that had involvement at all levels, including the top.

Officials also noted the challenges treating a varied population with a variety of issues, including medical and mental health problems.

Dorian Kittrell, director of Butte County Behavioral Health, recounted the results of the 2015 homeless census that counted 1,127 people without residences in Butte County. He said the

figure was about 1 percent of total number of homeless individuals in California at the time. Among the Butte County population, 54 percent had a disabling condition while 38 percent coped with mental illness.

County departments, including behavioral health and employment and social services, spent millions on services for people on the streets or at risk of becoming homeless.

Kittrell said behavioral health planned to spend \$11.3 million this year, including \$5.5 million for housing assistance. Another \$5.7 million on supportive services and long-term care.

Cathi Grams, director of Employment and Social Services, said \$19.7 million was spent on the CalWORKS program to provide temporary assistance to families of children who face problems such as unemployment.

All of the programs total \$87.6 million, Grams said. Aside from general assistance and veterans services, most of the people being helped are children.

Hospitals also face challenges treating those who are homeless. Amanda Wilkinson, case management supervisor at Enloe Medical Center, said issues include being able to contact patients via telephone, finding transportation, a lack of primary care doctors and accepting skilled nursing facilities.

Wilkinson said Enloe estimates that it treated 3,810 homeless individuals in 2014-15, a 34.4 percent increase over two years. Total charges, excluding received payments, increased 39.4 percent to \$14.2 million.

Robert J. Wentz, president of Oroville Hospital, noted that hospitals will take care of all patients. He said his hospital was more likely to admit homeless patients because they don't want to send individuals back to unhealthy environments.

While Wentz has been in the medical field, he has also been in real estate. He noted that businesses often struggle with the effects of homelessness, including vandalism. Wentz called for more resources to be dedicated to law enforcement.

"My concern is that we do things to try to reduce the homelessness overall," he said.

Butte County Sheriff Kory Honea said the matter was one that impacted all law enforcement agencies as police are often the first responders when someone is in need of help. However, he noted that merely being homeless is not a crime and deputies seek to balance the rights of the homeless, who are still citizens.

"The law enforcement response has to take into account competing interests," Honea said.

The sheriff said there has been an increase of calls pertaining to homelessness or perceived homelessness over the past two years. While he believed state laws such as Proposition 47 reducing many non-violent property crimes of less than \$950 to misdemeanors is related to the problem, he wasn't convinced they were a direct cause.

Chico Police Chief Mike O'Brien said the matter is complex and it was important to balance compassion and accountability.

"There is no single magic bullet that law enforcement is going to use to solve this problem," O'Brien said.

He noted that Chico had faced a perfect storm as there were rising problems, but the recession had led to cutbacks. He said some of the repercussions, including a 21 percent increase in burglaries, were unacceptable, but the city is working on solutions including the "Beautiful, Clean and Safe" program and rules against polluting waterways.

Ultimately, O'Brien said it was good to come together as a county to find healthy solutions.

"I'm learning every day more and more about this issue," he said.

Reach reporter Ryan Olson at 896-7763 and [facebook.com/NorCalJustice](https://www.facebook.com/NorCalJustice).