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Working together

Local government, service organizations throughout county to gather at forum on homelessness

By [Ernesto Rivera](#)

Laura Cootsona spends a lot of time working closely with government and nonprofit agencies that help homeless people. Five months into her tenure as executive director of the Jesus Center, she's constantly looking to her colleagues at other organizations to see what aid is being offered that could complement the center's services, which include serving meals, providing housing for women and children, and job skills programs.

For Cootsona, collaboration is key to addressing homelessness. That's why she's attending a special Homeless Symposium next Friday, April 15, that aims to bring together various Butte County agencies such as Behavioral Health, and nonprofits including the Torres Community Shelter, to educate people on what they're doing to help homeless people. While she is not presenting at the symposium, Cootsona said she wouldn't miss the chance to attend because it's the first gathering of its kind.



Jesus Center Executive Director Laura Cootsona is looking forward to hearing what other homeless service providers are doing to help their clients. PHOTO BY ERNESTO RIVERA

Join the conversation:

The public is invited to attend the Homeless Symposium. It is scheduled for Friday, April 15, 9 a.m.-noon, at the Southside Community Center, 2959 Lower Wyandotte Road, Oroville.

The idea is to get everyone on the same page and compile a comprehensive list of what's being done throughout the county. Each municipality, as well as unincorporated regions of Butte County, struggles with issues related to homelessness. In 2015, according to a census conducted by the Butte Countywide Homeless Continuum of Care, 1,127 homeless people were living in Butte County. Almost 75 percent were male and 571 of those who answered the survey were in Chico.

The symposium is hosted by Butte County and the municipalities therein: Biggs, Chico, Gridley, Oroville and Paradise. The fact that they all came together and representatives from each will be in attendance shows that homelessness is a countywide problem and should be addressed at that level, said Paul Hahn, chief administrative officer for Butte County.

“For example, if Chico toughens up on some of its homeless programs and people just move to Oroville, we haven't solved the problem,” he said. “There's a recognition that that's not a very good approach. If we're going to deal with it, let's deal with it on a broader perspective.”

Hahn sees a meeting like this as an important first step in moving forward and identifying gaps. Getting groups together to identify what everyone is doing helps shape new, well-informed ideas about what needs to be done next or better.

Dorian Kittrell, director of the Butte County Behavioral Health Administration, will speak about the services his department provides to people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness and hopes that the community will be able to find new ways to fill in gaps.

“My department, as well as the department of social services, we put significant resources into homelessness. Are they enough? No. There's never enough,” Kittrell said. “You want everyone as knowledgeable as possible so that efforts are coordinated and we're maximizing not only our dollars but [also] our ideas to best address the issue of homelessness as much as possible.”

Because the Jesus Center relies on private contributions, Cootsona has more freedom when it comes to spending. That's not the case for many other programs that receive government funding and must offer certain programs. Learning what those organizations are doing allows Cootsona to strategize the center's services and budget.

“So at the Jesus Center, we can offer services they may not be providing because we have money that has no strings attached,” she said. “So, rather than do what they're doing, I can do things that they can't do.”

The public is invited to attend the forum.

“It's really strategic for us to be there together to learn from each other,” Cootsona said. “Our strength in this area is us working together.”