

Findings and Desired Outcomes of Community Input Regarding Homelessness and Its Impacts in Chico

Prepared for the City of Chico

By Hope Street Coalition as Part of a Strategic Plan on Homelessness

Introduction

The City of Chico has been working to address homelessness and its impact for many years. As homelessness has increased, members of the community have become more concerned. Many have mobilized in various ways to provide assistance to those experiencing homelessness. Others have expressed concern over the impacts created by living in places not intended for human habitation.

In developing a strategic plan to address homelessness and its impacts, The City of Chico contracted with Hope Street Coalition to better understand the history of what has occurred in Chico, the perceptions, attitudes and beliefs of Chico residents, and various strategies, impacts, and obstacles to addressing homelessness. Hope Street Coalition conducted more than fifty interviews with elected leaders, city and county staff, homeless housing and services providers, business leaders, members of the faith-based community, and the general public.

From these interviews, it is clear that members of the community want a return to the safety and sense of community they feel epitomize Chico, want to assist people in need and reduce human suffering, and want to increase the level of transparency, accountability, and coordination by the city to address these issues.

Hope Street Coalition asked the following questions during its interviews:

- What are the top two strategies you feel should be included in a homelessness strategic plan?
- What are the biggest impacts of unsheltered homelessness to Chico?
- What are the biggest obstacles to addressing homelessness in Chico?

The most frequent responses to these questions can be generalized in the following ways:

1) **Strategies:**

- Improve coordination of services and housing for people experiencing homelessness between providers, the City of Chico, and Butte County.
- Improve efforts from the City of Chico to develop more housing in general, more low-income and affordable housing, and more shelter beds.
- Improve ways to provide treatment for mental illness and addiction to illegal substances for those experiencing homelessness.
- Develop a comprehensive system that moves people experiencing homelessness from shelter to transitional housing, to permanent supportive housing.
- Resolve the Warren v Chico injunction against the city.

2) **Impacts:**

- Increased trash, destruction of public spaces and the environment, and increased inability for the public to use parks and waterways.
- Reduced sense of community and general quality of life in Chico
- Increased crime and a reduced feeling of safety, particularly in Downtown Chico.
- Increased trauma, morbidity, mortality, violence, and crime visited on people experiencing homelessness
- Increased spending by the city and businesses to address the impacts of people living in places not intended for human habitation.

3) **Obstacles:**

- Economic and regulatory conditions that have led to a lack of housing, both entry-level market rate and subsidized affordable.
- Legal and regulatory conditions that have led to a lack of mental illness and drug addiction treatment.
- A lack of capacity among service providers in terms of their ability to effectively address the issue, raise sufficient funds to meet the unmet need, and regulatory and funding restrictions that create programmatic inefficiencies.
- Insufficient funding to meet needs - mostly to create housing and providing services to people experiencing homelessness.
- A lack of leadership from the City of Chico to address the variety of issues attributed to homelessness. A lack of planning and coordination with service providers in addressing specific issues related to homelessness.
- A lack of leadership and setting a course that demonstrates the city's capacity to effectively advance a strategy, and a perception of a lack of political will to take the issue seriously and devote resources to it.
- A concern that the city is poised to take on significant costs and responsibilities that are outside of its purview.

These responses were further confirmed during a two-day meeting with stakeholders made up of homelessness service providers, businesses leaders, and community members of the City of Chico. Those meetings explored in further depth the comments about strategies, impacts, and obstacles. The discussion also addressed what participants considered desired outcomes of a strategic plan addressing homelessness and its outcomes, root causes and how to address them, and ideas to address provider challenges and perceptions of city leadership and past efforts.

Findings

- **Restore Chico's Character** - Community members want a restored community, increased safety, and the returned use of parks and waterways for the general public.
- **Addiction and Mental Illness** - Community members want increased access and care for mental and behavioral health needs to reduce public drug use, public psychosis, and poverty.

- **Too Few Resources** - Providers of housing and services are struggling to maintain operations with existing resources. More resources are desired by programs to increase their impact, yet those resources must be balanced with increased capacity of providers and other entities and efforts engaged in addressing homelessness.
- **A Bias Towards Housing and Shelter** - Housing and shelter appear to be the interventions that get the most attention. The community is interested in addressing root causes that are not necessarily housing related.
- **Collect and Measure Data** - Community members and providers want to see more outreach services tied to dynamic data so that the true population of individuals experiencing homelessness can be determined. They want to better understand why people are experiencing homelessness so they can address the root causes and provide specific interventions.
- **Reduce Costs to Build Housing** - Community members identified NIMBY's, lawsuits, costs to build, lack of land, state regulations, and planning and zoning restrictions as big factors in creating more housing of all types, particularly low-income and affordable housing. There is a desire by some segments of the community to investigate and seek innovative ways to create more housing and more types of housing.
- **No One is in Charge** - There is a perception of disconnection and lack of communication and leadership between the City of Chico, providers of various housing and services, and community interests. Participants are concerned that no identified leader is providing direction and no sustained, long-term process is being conducted by the City on the issues of homelessness, the impacts of homelessness on the community, and other big issues facing Chico.
- **Accountability** - Some providers and members of the community discussed strategies built around incentives and disincentives, and the importance of engaging people experiencing homelessness in aspects of shelter, program participation, and behavioral issues that impact the community. In short, creating ways to incentivize those refusing housing and services to accept them.
- **Change Laws** - Discussions included the impacts of state policy, funding, and regulation and how they can limit strategies to address homelessness and its impacts or create additional challenges for communities. Federal and state funds require low-barrier approaches to homelessness and state laws, such as Proposition 47 discourages drug treatment, and reduce the effectiveness of drug courts. Prop 47 also incentivizes certain crimes like shoplifting and bike theft. These laws negatively impact the community.
- **Ineffective City Staffing** - Stakeholders recognized challenges to the city's efforts to coordinate programs and community engagement regarding homelessness and its impacts. The city's Homelessness Coordinator position was poorly executed because of structural challenges, lack of authority, and city decision making.

Discussion

Safety and Sense of Community - In conversations with providers, elected officials, and community members, one of the most frequently stated issues regarding homelessness is its negative impact on the community. Issues of safety, crime, trash, environmental damage to parks and waterways, and the inability for residents of the community to enjoy these spaces are some of the most common concerns of citizens of Chico.

These concerns are articulated in a variety of ways. From “loss of sense of community” to worries about the increased trauma of those experiencing homelessness, the negative impacts of homelessness on the community is the public’s top priority.

People are somewhat bewildered that the destruction of the sense of safety and community has been allowed to take place. They bemoan the loss of enjoying downtown. They are worried for the well-being of those experiencing homelessness and those who live, work, and run shops and businesses near encampments.

Mental Illness and Substance Use - Another significant issue is the perception of a high proportion of those living in areas not meant for human habitation that appear to experience mental illness and/or substance use disorder. There is wide recognition and frustration that little can be done to meet the needs of this population due to state law and the scarce and complicated nature of behavioral health services in the County. For example, Butte County has no public detox facilities to serve those who need alcohol and addiction recovery.

Complicating these issues is the perception that many individuals living in the parks and public spaces engage in an active defiance against efforts to reclaim public land and attempts to address the poverty and deprivation of these individuals. Community members report certain efforts to recruit and educate those living in parks and public spaces to occupy these areas and resist following the orders of law enforcement. The regular provision of food, legal advice, material resources, and other accommodations to those living unhoused feeds into this concern. In short, there is a recognized sense of an orchestrated resistance to regulating public spaces in order to prove a political or social point.

Housing - Of course, another major finding is the concern of the lack of housing in general and the specific lack of low-income or affordable housing in Chico. Community members recognize the changing economic, zoning, planning, and regulatory structures that slows the creation and increases the cost of new development in Chico. Plenty of creative ideas exist; from shared housing, to allowing accessory dwelling units, to creating a sustainable, reduced-cost type of permanent housing, to parking for trailers and recreational vehicles, and, of course, increasing funding for the creation of affordable housing. The bottom line for many is that there are just not enough places and variety of places for people to live, whether they be for those without resources and housing or those whom local businesses attempt to recruit seeking to re-locate to Chico.

Role of the City - Members of the community hold competing visions of the role of the city in addressing homelessness. Some in the community believe that the city should become a

provider of housing and homelessness assistance services “because it is already paying the costs for not providing services.” Others see no role for the city as a provider of housing and services, but rather a manager or catalyst for the initiatives of community-based organizations. People realize that the city must maintain its ministerial functions to the community. However, they are reluctant to extend the city’s activities into the more substantial, expensive, and complicated role of providing homelessness services.

Resources - Resources are a main concern among those that provide services and housing. Nonprofit entities recognize the significant role public funding plays from the federal government, state, county, and municipalities in providing housing and services. Indeed, without this source or revenue, most providers would be unable to serve at their current level. Some service providers are sensitive to the requirements of government funding and are forced to refuse government funds for private funds so that they can continue the programming they provide. Additional funding, therefore, should be tailored to community needs.

Capacity - Non-providers express concern that the capacity of housing and service providers is not at a level where additional resources will necessarily translate into reductions in homelessness and its attendant impacts. Community members indicate that specific capacity issues include weak or limited leadership among providers, challenges working beyond parochial interests, and little ability to scale their programs.

Some community members questioned why so much of the narrative is focused on housing and shelter when those resources address downstream effects instead of root causes. Short term rental assistance, behavioral counselling, or recovery from substance use disorders could play a critical and less expensive role than the provision of housing to resolve issues of homelessness.

Accurate Information - Based on comments of those outside of housing and shelter providers, few know who makes up those experiencing homelessness in Chico and how best to assist them. The lack of information makes it unclear if things are improving or getting worse.

This can be exemplified by the common narrative that homelessness has increased in Chico due to the Camp Fire which destroyed 14,000 homes in Paradise. Some are convinced that the absorption of so many folks whose homes were destroyed has tightened the rental market causing the most economically fragile to become homeless. Others believe that individuals, not impacted by the Camp Fire, used the disaster as a means to receive hand-outs and public assistance. Similarly, some believe that people are coming to Chico because of the injunction because “Cops leave you alone and the community gives you free stuff.”

The bottom line is that more fact-finding outreach and accumulation of data is needed to serve the interests of the community and that information should be publicly available.

Coordination - There exists, particularly among housing and services providers, a desire for increased coordination with the city to engage in strategies to increase assistance to those experiencing homelessness. These providers seek a closer relationship with the city to offer their expertise and ideas as solutions.

In particular, concerns were expressed with respect to receiving input and ideas for the RFP to provide temporary shelter at the BMX site. Some providers felt they were shut out of the process or that their input was not sufficiently incorporated.

Leadership - Lastly, but certainly not least in the findings of this discussion, is the issue of leadership. Homelessness is largely perceived as a public issue, best addressed by municipalities and the county. Because of its perception as a city/county issue, there is an expectation that the city “owe” the community a response and plan on how it will address homelessness and the impacts of homelessness on the community.

Leadership is a constant and consistent complaint with respect to the issue of homelessness in communities across the nation. A lack of leadership can be assigned to anything, from the defeat of a desired ordinance to complications arising from the availability of funding to the inability to secure partners for an important project.

Leadership can be fostered by articulating specific goals, the steps required to reach those goals, and the engagement, communication, and motivation necessary to bring others along. One of the perceptions with participants of interviews and of the stakeholders meetings is that the city has not articulated specific goals and, therefore, has failed to produce a sense that it is in control and leading on this issue.

Desired Outcomes

Two fundamental questions emerged during interviews and stakeholder meetings that have great utility as principles for addressing homelessness and its impacts on Chico:

- 1) What does the community want to achieve?
- 2) What is the city able and willing to do?

It is a regular function of municipalities to address competing interests and expectations that exceed the purview or capacity of the city. Some see the issue of homelessness and its impacts as one of regulation and enforcement. Others see the issue as assisting the vulnerable and less fortunate. Many do not believe the city has the resources, ability, and political will to solve the crisis of homelessness and to solve it in a manner that satisfied both constituencies. A focus on outcomes, however, may highlight common ground.

Regarding desired outcomes the community seeks in addressing homelessness, three main objectives were consistently repeated:

- 1) Restore the community
- 2) Care for those in need
- 3) Coordinate, plan, and implement strategies in a more transparent, accountable, and effective way

Most community members agree that by addressing the issue of homelessness, its impacts *should* be reduced. The federal government, the state of California, and advocates for the homeless all promote the concept that providing housing and services will reduce the number of people

experiencing homelessness and the impacts and costs associated with people living in places not meant for human habitation.

Housing and services are costly interventions. Shelter, permanent supportive housing, and the administrative system and structure prescribed through federal and state funding for homelessness assistance is an enormous undertaking for any government.

What will it take in resources, taxes, development, and changes to city services for the city to assert a leadership role in addressing homelessness? Can Chico afford to “go big” and invest in a multi-year commitment of shelter, housing, case-management, and other necessary services to house those living in public spaces?

It’s reasonable for many in the community to be skeptical about committing the city and its scarce resources toward this significant new role of funder and provider of housing and services for those experiencing homelessness. Almost all community members say that the city has done a poor job in addressing homelessness and its impacts.

How can community members be sure that the city’s activities will result in the reduction of individuals living in parks, waterways, and public spaces? They see larger cities with larger budgets making things worse as they attempt to address homelessness. How can citizens be confident that crime will subside, that open drug use, psychosis, and aggressive behavior will be reduced? And how will the actions of the city restore the sense of community that many residents report has been lost?

Conclusion

Hope Street Coalition engaged in more than fifty individual interviews and two stakeholder meetings to determine the perceptions, experiences, ideas, strategies, priorities, and obstacles to addressing homelessness and its impacts on the City of Chico. These inputs can help guide the city to understand the public perception of the problem of homelessness and what they hope can be done about it.

It is clear citizens desire the restoration of the quality of life and sense of community they grew up with or compelled them to make Chico their home. They are concerned with issues of safety, crime, the destruction of public spaces, and aggressive behavior. They also are skeptical that current systems and programs are up to the task of solving the problem of homelessness.

Chico residents also want to help the needy and improve the lives of those without places to live, who suffer from untreated mental illness and drug dependence, and who need assistance to overcome life’s challenges. They know that resources are scarce and want straightforward ideas to make real change. They desire leadership and accountability from the city, county, and providers. They also expect that offers of assistance would be accepted by those experiencing homelessness to reduce the number of individuals inhabiting public places.

These findings and outcomes are important in determining a way forward for the city and the community. Chico has been exposed to competing narratives that have led to the polarization of the community and the creation of unrealistic expectations. The way forward must include

agreed upon basic principles and realistic objectives, and be grounded in the realities of what is actually happening in Chico and the ability of the city to effectively address it. These findings indicate that there is plenty of common ground to build upon with the right leadership and strategy.



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