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Missing in action

Panel overlooks emergency shelter in initial recommendation for state funding

Joy Amaro sees new faces at the Torres Community Shelter every day, hearing more and more stories about people displaced from their homes.

Amaro, the shelter's executive director, recently helped a family with three children secure a hotel for a week until they sign a lease on March 1. A relative who'd taken them in had kicked them out, Amaro said. They were sleeping in their car when Chico Unified School District personnel referred them to the shelter.

Stories like this were prevalent before the Camp Fire, but now? "It just amplified, magnified the need," Amaro told the CN&R. "And I don't know how many phases we'll see of new people coming to our doors ... whether they burned bridges, or grandma kicked them off the couch, or the [landlords] kicked them out to sell."

For Amaro and other homeless service providers, the need for emergency shelter is paramount in Butte County, especially considering the post-Camp Fire landscape, with a saturated housing market and lack of vacant shelter beds. That's why, at a Butte Countywide Homeless Continuum of Care (CoC) meeting on Monday (Feb. 25), Amaro, who serves on the CoC's council, called for the group to reconsider

its planned distribution of \$4.8 million in one-time state funds, via the Homeless Emergency Aid Program (HEAP), and prioritize these needs.

A couple of months ago, the CoC appointed a six-member committee of volunteers to review and rank 22 applications from 14 organizations. As is, the recommendations it presented to the CoC council on Monday would not add any emergency shelter beds to Butte County. Though HEAP funding is intentionally broad—it can be used on a variety of services, rental assistance and other subsidies, and capital improvements—counties and cities across California had to declare shelter crises to access it.

"Why is the HEAP application review committee not prioritizing [an] increase in shelter beds and services, especially in [the] wake of one of the worst disasters in the nation?" Amaro wrote in a letter to the CoC. "There is not available housing, and the most effective way to house large amounts of people is in a housing first shelter."

Without HEAP funding, the 24-hour low-barrier shelter project spearheaded by the Jesus Center and Safe Space Winter Shelter could be in jeopardy, Jesus Center Executive Director Laura Cootsona added at the meeting. Those organizations hoped to leverage a \$1 million

donation from Walmart with HEAP funds to afford a two-year lease and renovations to a property they are close to securing. "We may have to actually rescind the gift," she told the council. "That is not a threat or a promise, it's just a reality."

Stephen Terry, of Oroville Rescue Mission, voiced his concerns, as well. He'd hoped to receive funding for a 120-person low-barrier shelter. "I am appalled when I look at this, because the shelters in our area for a housing emergency grant all scored low and would get nothing out of this grant, at all," he said. "That's a farce for what this is."

The two largest shares of HEAP funds, as recommended, would go to Caminar and Ampla Health. About \$1.58 million would go to the former to create two 12-unit apartment complexes in Oroville for mentally ill individuals (Ron Reed's Base Camp Village project); and \$1.2 million to Ampla for a mobile medical unit to provide primary health care to homeless people.

In response to the feedback, however, a new ad hoc committee was formed to review the recommendations. That group planned to meet Friday (March 1), and includes the following CoC council members: Alex Brown, Lisa Currier, Linda Draper, Scott Huber and Anastacia Snyder.

They'll take into account the points Amaro brought up in her letter: looking at funding strategically—considering the hundreds of millions of dollars in affordable housing bills