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CHAT, Torres partner to house families

When Kimberly Meriweather arrived at the Torres Community Shelter with two of her children a few months ago, she was desperate.

Her youngest son, Charles Steele Jr., has physical and intellectual disabilities, and she knew it would be a difficult transition for him, she told the CN&R. But she was out of options: They were no longer able to stay with a family member they'd been with since 2015, and finding a place to rent on her limited income proved fruitless.

Just the disruption of his normal routine was unsettling—Charles had violent meltdowns at the shelter, where they shared a room with other families.

It was the first time in his life, however, that Meriweather recalled seeing others respond with a desire to help. The staff of the Torres Shelter didn't look at the family "like we did something wrong," she said, tears welling in her eyes.

Meriweather, a single mother, shared all of this from the comfort of her own living room in central Chico. She moved in about two weeks ago, along with Charles and two of his siblings. Her family is among the first to be housed as a part of the Chico Housing Action Team's (CHAT) latest program,

Hand Up Supportive Housing, or HUSH. The organization is partnering on the effort with the Torres Shelter, which provides case management.

This is possible via a \$455,000 Homeless Emergency Aid Program (HEAP) grant awarded to CHAT in March by the Butte Countywide Homeless Continuum of Care (CoC) to house a minimum of 10 families. Five have found homes so far.

"This is an awesome program ... it means that my kids are stable," Meriweather told the CN&R. "We feel like more of a family now."

Meanwhile, meeting the needs of families has been a focus of the Torres Shelter as well. Executive Director Joy Amaro told the CN&R that her organization will apply for state and federal grants through the CoC this year, with the goal of establishing a separate family shelter.

The shelter had been pursuing low-barrier status. However, families steadily continued to seek its services: for the past two full years of data available, the shelter served 133 children one year and 115 the next. As a result, the shelter—which is at capacity—has continued drug testing and separates families from the rest of the guests.

As families have moved into HUSH homes, more have filled their place. "Until there's an actual family shelter established, we cannot go completely low-barrier

because we do not have a place for [families] to go permanently," Amaro said.

For CHAT, the population became a priority over time. Co-founder Leslie Johnson said the volunteer organization has about 30 homes it subleases to single adults, seniors and students via its Housing Now program, in which multiple single tenants pay for their own room and utilities (about \$450 per month).

"We began to realize that there are a lot of families, and especially after the fire, families living in cars, vans and garages," she said. "So we definitely wanted to see what we could do to help."

Here's how HUSH works: CHAT holds the lease on a property and subleases to the families, offering them permanent supportive housing and subsidized rent—and tenants pay 30 percent of their income.

Johnson said the organizations work with the families in the hopes that they either will assume the full rental amount or move to another home in two years, when the grant funding expires.

CHAT addresses any property or utility issues and delivers food. Amanda Gaylord, the Torres Shelter's family case manager, says she works closely with the families to create their own plans depending on their needs, including budgeting, cooking and working with schools and medical providers for their children.

For Meriweather, Gaylord has been a tireless guide: Most recently,