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Homelessness in Butte County increased by at least 16 percent since 2017, and service providers are finding it incredibly challenging to secure housing for the people they serve post-Camp Fire.

PHOTO BY KATAR
ZYNABIALASIEWICZ/ISTOCK

Dedicated to recovery

Homeless service providers talk housing challenges, solutions post-Camp Fire

Nicole LiBaire sees parallels between a Butte County reeling from the impacts of the Camp Fire and what communities experienced in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina.

She worked for more than a decade on disaster recovery initiatives for Louisiana, including a 3,000-unit permanent statewide supportive housing program implemented post-disaster.

“Time and time again” LiBaire witnessed extremely low-income folks “pushed out of the market,” she told the CN&R. As prices skyrocketed, homes were sold and rentals were snatched up by those who could afford them. She recalled an instance in which a rental was listed despite a floodwater-soaked bedroom floor.

LiBaire, who now works as a senior associate for the Technical Assistance Collaborative (TAC), has been helping the Butte Countywide Homeless Continuum of Care (CoC) through a contract with the California Department of Housing & Community Development. Though TAC, a Boston-based non-profit, is assisting CoCs statewide, Butte County is receiving additional attention post-Camp Fire, she said. The contract expires at the end of April 2020.

“Everything is amplified in

Butte just because of the sheer size of the impact,” she said. “And it’s not something that just goes away overnight.”

Butte County homeless service providers were feeling the strain of a tight housing market even before the Camp Fire. And the community’s poorest are now being hit the hardest, because they can’t afford anything within the remaining small inventory. Preliminary Homeless Point-in-Time Count figures released by the CoC show that homelessness increased by at least 16 percent since 2017 (see “Homelessness snapshot,” Sifter, June 20).

At a CoC council meeting on Monday (Aug. 19), local agencies provided perspective on the struggles they’ve experienced serving these populations. While presenting an annual program report required for U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) grantees, Butte County Housing Authority representative Bow Lee put it bluntly: “We have the participants, we have the funding, but the lack of housing, particularly post-Camp Fire, is very challenging.”

Other providers echoed that sentiment. Take, for instance, Butte County Behavioral Health. The department is choosing to abandon

two grants—totaling \$62,864 that serve 10 mentally ill individuals—because it has become too difficult to exhaust all of the funds for rental assistance programs. These dollars will return to the CoC, with the intent that they be awarded to another local organization after a competitive application process.

Don Taylor, Behavioral Health assistant director of clinical services, told the CN&R after the meeting that the department made this decision “because of the lack of units” available—Behavioral Health cannot change the grant amounts and cannot find enough units to fully utilize the funds. They will be relinquished next summer, Taylor said, and Behavioral Health will help those 10 clients get section 8 vouchers to keep their housing.

The department intends to continue pursuing renewal for three other HUD grants totaling \$100,000 for its supportive and permanent housing programs.

Though the department has housing case managers who work with property managers, Taylor said, it’s hard to convince landlords to deal with the “red tape” that comes with government funding—payments often come in arrears, and extensive paperwork and inspections are required.

“There are less property managers willing to take HUD dollars because they can get market rate,” he said. “Our individuals are competing against households with higher incomes, better rental histories.”

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