

# 'The right path'

## Supervisors vote to adopt program to take on homelessness, housing

**Butte County took a huge step** toward tackling the homeless and housing crises on Tuesday (Aug. 27) when the Board of Supervisors voted to take over the local Continuum of Care (CoC) and create four new positions focusing on the issues.

"We have a public health, public safety and moral crisis. This is our problem," explained Jessica Wood, an employee of the Behavioral Health Department who was part of the team that came up with the plan presented Tuesday. "We need a centralized, coordinated system, to bring services together, and partnerships between public and private entities."

Homelessness and housing are two problems plaguing Butte County and communities across California, Casey Hatcher, deputy chief administrative officer, told the board. In the past, they'd been addressed separately—homelessness mostly through social services and nonprofits, housing through planning and zoning. It was time to take a different tack, she said.

"We've been siloed," she said. "We need to bring services together, bolster staff, and work better together to provide services to the homeless and provide housing."

The proposal heard Tuesday was presented by Butte County's Leadership Academy—a group of staff from across departments chosen to receive special leadership training. It includes the creation of a new program under the umbrella of the Department of Employment and Social Services (DESS) called Homeless & Housing Outreach Management Education (HHOME). There would be a homeless/housing administrator, a program manager (basically the same role Jennifer Griggs recently vacated as CoC coordinator), an administrative analyst and a housing navigator.

"It will be an integrated county-wide response," said Shelby Boston, DESS director. "We will expand upon [existing] col-

laborations and work better internally with departments we haven't historically worked with—like Development Services. Plus, we'll work more with nonprofits."

Laura Cootsona, executive director of the Jesus Center, addressed the board with a big smile. Since taking on that role four years ago, she said, it became immediately evident that there was a "systems problem," particularly when it came to the CoC. The system simply was not working.

"This proposal has been long-awaited," she said. "As I got involved in the CoC, it was my least favorite meeting of my entire life every single month. And I go to a lot of meetings. ... I cannot wait for you all to collaborate and to show up and bring some incredible leadership together and help us. The nonprofit sector in this region is stretched thin, especially after the fire. We're mighty in our tiny boots, but we want your help."

Supervisor Tami Ritter agreed that the CoC system has been flawed. The HHOME program would include help for local nonprofits to apply for grant funding, something that the CoC identified as a need following a particularly cumbersome round of grant disbursements earlier this year. Oroville's nonprofits received no funding, purportedly because of insufficient grant-writing.

"I'm interested in seeing the CoC representing the entire county," Ritter said. "I want to see a minimum allocation to go to each jurisdiction. Oroville would have a minimum amount entitled to it regardless of their applications. Paradise would have a minimum ...."

As for funding, the county already receives grant money from the state that's set aside for administrative duties. And Gov. Gavin Newsom just added \$650 million to the state budget to address homelessness. The county also is hoping to get some seed money from the North Valley Community Foundation, plus contributions from local hospitals and municipalities.

"The city of Chico already contributes to the CoC. Will other communities?" posed Fred Thurman, Leadership Academy member and DESS employee.

"We all know that we have a homeless problem in Butte County," said Oroville City Councilwoman Linda Draper. "We also know ... between 2017 and 2019, homeless numbers increased by 16 percent. A lot of that is due to the Camp Fire."

"You set the tone in Butte County," she told the board. "When you show the initiative, hopefully it will trickle down to local jurisdictions, and they'll follow your lead."

In the end, not one person spoke against the proposal and the board voted unanimously to adopt it. Because of funding options that

will come available early next year, Boston explained, hiring will begin next month and they'll open a navigation center in an existing county building in Oroville in coordination with nonprofits within the year.

"The impact that this proposed plan could have would reduce our public safety calls, reduce hospitalizations, have a huge impact on all of our emergency response to a degree that we can't even fathom right now," Ritter said. "Integrating homeless services with all departments will allow us to modify housing codes, to incentivize compact development."

"I'm just so happy we're on the right path."

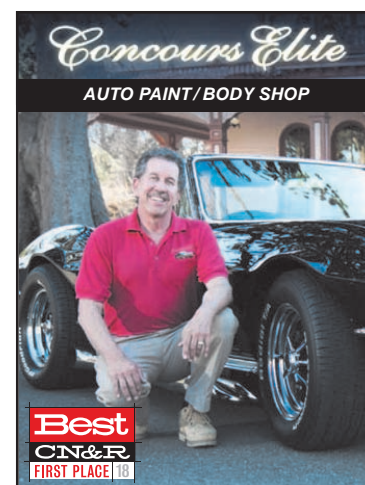
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### PRIDE FEST

Over 900 people gathered at the Chico City Plaza Saturday (Aug. 24) for an LGBTQ celebration hosted by Stonewall Alliance. The Chico Pride Festival included live music, information and craft booths, speakers, food and dancing, as well as other events around town held over four days.

PHOTO BY CHARLES FINLAY



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