

assistance, case management and employment services. At Chico State, that allowed Basic Needs to hire Jewett in July. To best deliver services to students, Basic Needs has also partnered with local homeless assistance agencies True North Housing Alliance and Chico Housing Action Team.

“These agencies are at the forefront of the fight against homelessness in our area, and it’s invaluable for us to partner with them and share their knowledge and resources,” Chico State Basic Needs Administrator Joe Picard said. “Working with them better enables us to identify and meet students’ needs so that they can achieve academic success.”

Living on the edge

According to information provided by Basic Needs, the exact number of students experiencing homelessness is hard to quantify and often under-reported due to stigma homeless students face, but studies estimate up to 10 percent of students nationwide live in unstable housing conditions. A recent study by three members of Chico State’s faculty indicates those numbers are worse locally, with 14.7 percent of students having experienced homelessness in the wake of the Camp Fire. Basic Needs research indicates more than 500 Chico State students (3.3 percent) experience homelessness during an average academic year.

Jewett explained that the definition of homelessness as it applies to students doesn’t just mean those sleeping outdoors, but also accounts for those in precarious shared housing or couch-surfing.

“Our area has had a vacancy rate of

between 1 [percent] and 3 percent for years, and the Camp Fire only made it worse,” Jewett said. “It’s really difficult for students to secure housing in that situation, when they might not have built up much credit yet, or if they don’t have parents who are able to co-sign with them to rent a place. There’s a lot of barriers.”

Jewett noted that in addition to local housing issues complicated by the area’s recent disasters, the COVID-19 crisis has led to increased housing and financial insecurity. The amount of students seeking help at Basic Needs has increased 200 percent since March, according to Picard, with 26 students being successfully housed since that month and more in need.

“A lot of our students were just getting by working 15 to 20 hours a week in the service industry, but so many places have had to shut down because of the virus, and the students are left with no job and no income,” Jewett said. “More than ever, they’re struggling.”

In addition to rapid-rehousing services and food services via the pantry, the Basic Needs Project offers emergency loans and grants. (See info box, page 12, for details on applications for services.)

Ferncase, for one, is glad that he found the pantry and thankful for the services to which it led him. He hopes to graduate with a degree in psychology in about a year and is considering a career in counseling.

“This program has helped tremendously,” he said. “[Before], it was always the same story. I could just never get a break, and I never felt like things would be OK, and that I could do this. It felt like an uphill battle.

“But it’s getting a lot better,” he added. “Right now, I feel like my life is the best it’s ever been.” □

Case Manager Emma Jewett and Administrator Joe Picard outside the Basic Needs Project office at Chico State.

PHOTO BY KEN SMITH



The Facts About Homelessness

Claim:

People experiencing homelessness prefer the freedom of life on the street.

Facts:

- Most individuals experiencing homelessness welcome immediate access to independent housing with support services.
- There are rare cases of those who favor a homeless lifestyle, but this is far from the norm.



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