

say. It is too far away. It is hot in Chico. There are no generators. There is no Ferris wheel.”

A familiar saga

The airport shelter bears little resemblance to models that have recently been successful in other cities. For one of the best examples, Chico leaders needn't look further than Santa Rosa, which operated a much-lauded temporary sanctioned campground at its Finley Community Center from May to November 2020.

Though virtually all California cities are grappling with homeless issues, Chico and the Sonoma County seat share some distinct factors that add difficulty the struggle. Both suffer from a lack of housing, particularly affordable housing, a situation exacerbated in both cities by massive wildfires (the 2017 Tubbs Fire that leveled several neighborhoods in Santa Rosa was the most destructive wildfire until the Camp Fire struck the following year).

Santa Rosa has also been the subject of action in federal court over its treatment of the homeless—legal issues related to a civil rights case filed in 2018. Sonoma County operated under a stipulated preliminary injunction that barred enforcement against campers on public property from August 2019 through June 2020.

As in Chico, long-running, heated political debate reached a fever pitch in Santa Rosa with the spring 2020 proliferation of COVID, as highly visible makeshift encampments took root. Due to social distancing measures, capacity at the city's primary homeless shelter—Samuel L. Jones Hall—was reduced from 230 to 150.

According to Santa Rosa City Councilman Tom Schwedhelm—who was then serving as mayor and spearheaded the Finley site—the sanctioned campground with tents providing space for up to 68 people was part of a multi-pronged pandemic response. The city also provided motel rooms for unhoused individuals with health risks according to the Project Roomkey model, and the Finley site served as a six-month stopgap while the city made improvements to—and installed large, tent-like “sprung structures” at—Sam Jones Hall to increase capacity there.

The city of Santa Rosa committed \$680,000 to outfit and run the campground and \$2.6 million to improve the permanent shelter. Schwedhelm said the costs have been or are largely expected to be reimbursed by COVID- and housing-related funding from FEMA, Community Development Block Grants and fire-disaster relief.

Just as shelter solutions have been met with massive resistance in Chico, NIMBYs and citizens touting public safety concerns came out in force to oppose the Finley campground. More than 400 people signed on to a Zoom meeting of Santa Rosa's City Council in mid-May of 2020, with hundreds intent on stopping the plan and threatening to vote out council members who supported the project.



Jennielynn Holmes, chief program officer for Catholic Charities of the Diocese of Santa Rosa, oversaw operations at a Santa Rosa sanctioned campground.

PHOTO COURTESY OF JENNIELYNN HOLMES

Schwedhelm and his colleagues forged ahead: “We had to do something because of the gravity of the situation,” he said in a recent phone interview. “It was just the right thing to do.

“Part of it in my case was having the political will ... I base my decisions on data and evidence-based practices,” continued Schwedhelm, a longtime homeless advocate who embraces the Housing First philosophy (an assistance model based in the belief that people must be housed before being able to address other issues, like unemployment, substance abuse and mental illness). He's also a veteran law enforcement officer who formerly served as Santa Rosa's police chief.

In order to appease fears about safety, the Finley plan included round-the-clock security. In keeping with best practices and the ultimate goal of actually addressing homelessness, the city contracted with Catholic Charities of the Diocese of Santa Rosa—which also oversees the Sam Jones shelter—to run the camp and deliver services. Catholic Charities provided caseworkers for all camp guests and partnered with other agencies, including a mobile health unit that visited several times weekly to conduct COVID testing and provide other medical services.

Lessons learned

In stark contrast to Chico's airport shelter, the Finley site was located in a scenic park at the center of a relatively affluent tree-lined neighborhood located a few miles away from the city center and a short walk from grocery stores and other services. Schwedhelm said that, as the camp began to operate with minimal problems and disturbance to neighbors,

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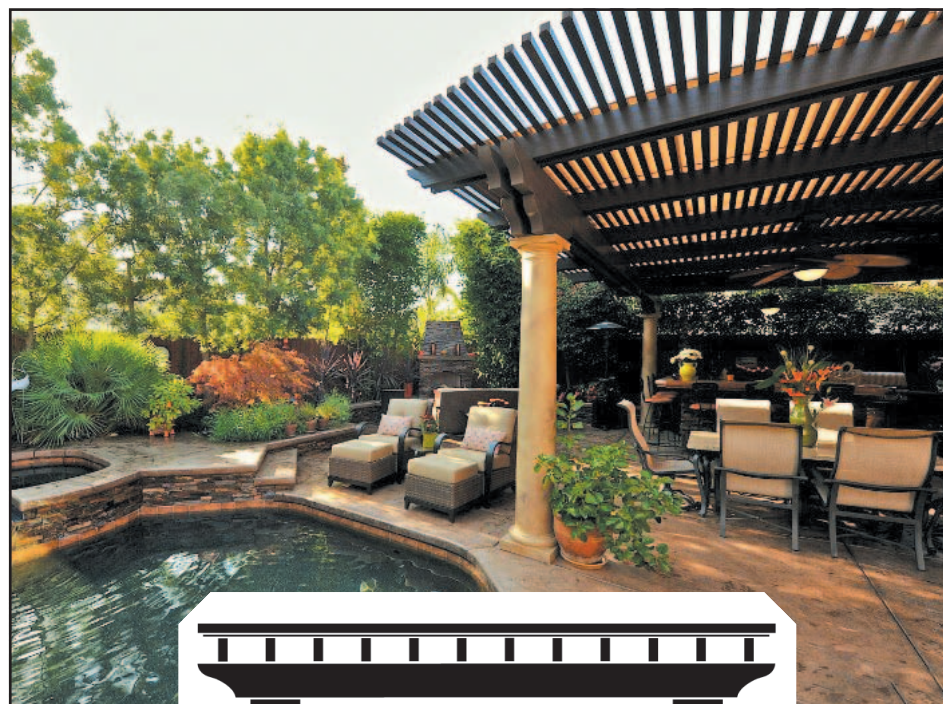


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