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SHELTER CONTINUED FROM PAGE 23



Heat is a big concern among critics of the airport shelter site, where temperatures often reach the triple digits. One "cooling tent" provides the only shade at the site.

PHOTO BY KEN SMITH

many of its naysayers had a change of heart, with a few even offering to donate goods and services to assist the camp. By the end of the six months, he invited the public to a Zoom postmortem meeting to voice any complaints about how it went. He said less than a dozen people participated, mostly to compliment the camp.

Jennielynn Holmes, the chief program officer for Santa Rosa's Catholic Charities, oversaw operations at the Finley site. She told the CN&R by phone that the camp exceeded expectations, and that several guests were able to transition into permanent housing.

"What we quickly learned is that it was so much more than just a pandemic response," she said. "It actually became a way to engage part of our population we'd been trying to work with for many years, but traditional shelter was not necessarily something that worked for them. At one point, we found that more than half the people in the camp had never engaged in services before."

"We also found it didn't just provide safety from the pandemic," she continued, "but safety for a very vulnerable population. ... We had a lot of women who were victims of domestic violence or sexual assault come to the site, and they felt safe here with 24/7 staffing and security."

Holmes said there were, of course, some issues with unruly guests and other problems, but none serious enough to detract from the site's overall success. Two of the biggest day-to-day problems encountered at the Finley shelter mirror some concerns that have been voiced about the airport shelter: weather and maximum population.

"We faced everything from extreme wind to heat to downpours to cold weather," she said. "If we do it again, we might provide more than a tent, something more sturdy."

As for size, Holmes said Finley housed 65 people at its busiest: "I would not do more than that for sure," she said. "My recommendation would be smaller camps in different parts of community. The more people you have, the more conflicts and more issues you have, and staff gets stretched pretty thin."

Holmes said another important thing to keep in mind is that sanctioned camping—and any shelter options—need to be part of a

pathway that ultimately leads to permanent housing.

"If your community is not also focused on building and securing housing units for these individuals, then you're not solving homelessness, you're just managing it in place," she said. "You're giving that person a place to be for the moment, but you're not resolving the crisis or issues that the community is facing, and you're keeping a marginalized and vulnerable community marginalized and vulnerable."

Too little, too late?

What remains to be seen is if Judge England—who's presiding over the court case brought against the city of Chico by Legal Services of Northern California on behalf of eight unhoused individuals—will be appeased by the city's efforts thus far. England is expected to make a decision July 2. If the judge lifts a temporary restraining order against enforcement action, the city is poised to again clear unsanctioned homeless encampments.

In his June 24 message to the public, Morgan expressed his belief that court will find the city's airport and follow-up at the BMX site acceptable.

"It is a site we are optimistic the judge will find acceptable as a place for those with no where else to go can go and rest," he wrote.

Brown expressed doubt that the court will be pleased: "I'm curious to see what the judge says, and I really don't anticipate it being positive," she said. "If that's the case, then at some point the conservative council members and city staff who supported and enabled this plan need to be held accountable."

Howlett said that, whether the judge accepts the plan or not, the airport shelter has already done more harm to community relations regarding the homeless crisis.

"If this is the best possible solution to get the TRO [temporary restraining order] removed, people will not put up with it," he said. "[The city] won't be able to continue the heavy-handed tactics they have used for removal. They'll meet with greater resistance than ever before ... not just from the homeless community but from those who want to help them." □

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