

CHIP's facility manager, Aaron McLaughlin, believes the transformative power of stable housing can change people's lives.

PHOTO BY RAY LAAGER

# Under Maintenance

## CHIP's Aaron McLaughlin tends the grounds—and the community

BY MATT CRAGGS

One of the basic human needs is shelter, but a roof can offer more than protection from the elements. At the rental properties owned and managed by Community Housing Improvement Project, Aaron McLaughlin and his maintenance teams care for the grounds, units and—most importantly—the tenants.

For the last five years, McLaughlin has acted as CHIP's facility manager, coordinating roving and dedicated teams for day-to-day maintenance and repairs, and juggling larger remodeling projects—and their respective vendors, contractors, and supplies—that are as diverse as the properties themselves.

Of the 18—soon to be 19—apartment complexes that CHIP owns or manages across Butte, Glenn, Tehama, Shasta, Sutter, and Yuba counties, McLaughlin says CHIP rental properties can each house from 12 to 100 families in buildings from the late-1800s to newly constructed complexes.

And though CHIP focuses some apartment complexes on creating communities designed for senior citizens or farm workers, McLaughlin says every property represents CHIP's dedication to strengthening the tenants through sustainable housing.

"We really, at times," McLaughlin says, "try to do the impossible or whatever it takes to get someone housing that's sustainable, get them qualified, and whatever they need."

Before joining CHIP's maintenance team close to 20 years ago, McLaughlin started his career as a general contractor and worked in apartment maintenance for market-rate rentals. Now, doing the same work for a nonprofit, McLaughlin has seen the full potential of his work when guided and motivated by a community's needs.

"If you work for a for-profit company," McLaughlin says, "a lot of the time you go in on a turnover and you'll just replace everything. The main focus is to make the money to keep the company rolling."

Instead, on repairs, rehabs, remodels, and turnovers—when one tenant leaves and McLaughlin's team prepares the unit for the next family—McLaughlin keeps costs down by utilizing tactics not always employed by commercial rentals.

"We're able to use grant money and loans to focus more on the tenants themselves, their needs, and what we can do to make our product and units more achievable for them," McLaughlin says.

In addition to securing outside funding, McLaughlin prices materials and solicits multiple bids for contractors, looking for creative ways to keep costs low and, ultimately, help to lower tenants' rent.

However, McLaughlin stresses, low rent does not come at the expense of quality or comfort.

"We work really hard," McLaughlin says, "and are held by our funders and entities that govern us to a very, very high standard. In many ways, a higher standard than commercial rentals."

Funders and representatives from government organizations constantly inspect CHIP units and complexes but, for McLaughlin, the motivation to meet and exceed these high standards goes beyond keeping everything in working order. It's about making the tenants comfortable.

And while McLaughlin is the first to say that CHIP is a tenant-oriented company, in 2018, he experienced firsthand that it is an employee-oriented company as well.

"During the Camp Fire," McLaughlin says, "we lost our

home and we stayed in one of the units CHIP had. That was huge in a time of uncertainties, but CHIP was there and they welcomed me and my family with open arms."

Due to one of the funding programs temporarily waiving eligibility requirements for fire survivors, McLaughlin's family lived in a CHIP property for more than a year before finding another house in the area. This stability in a time of upheaval meant a great deal to the family, as it has for so many others affected by natural disasters, COVID-19, job loss or homelessness.

"When you have someone who might not come from much," McLaughlin says, "and you're able to give them a nice, clean place to live, it helps boost their lifestyle. Their whole outlook on life sometimes."

For McLaughlin, this transformative power that stable housing can bring to a family marks the difference between market-rate and CHIP rental properties. Though the nuts and bolts of repair and maintenance are similar, it is CHIP's intent and the community impact that turns roof repairs into community building and a house into a home.

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