

A roof over all heads? Yolo County dreams big to solve homelessness

By Jonathan Edwards | Enterprise staff writer | December 18, 2009 09:26

Yolo County wants to end homelessness in a decade, but its hopes, right now, are paper dreams.

A countywide coalition of churches, businesses and elected officials have spent a year drafting a 10-year plan to get everyone off the streets and under roofs by 2020. They hired a San Francisco nonprofit, HomeBase, to draft the plan after the city of West Sacramento, which is spearheading the effort, landed a grant in 2007 to formulate a strategy to eliminate homelessness.

Officials estimate between 1,100 and 2,200 Yolo County residents find themselves without shelter at some point during any given year.

Bridget DeJung, a HomeBase attorney, said they're looking at Sacramento County as a model, which decreased chronic homelessness by 35 percent in the first 18 months of a similar plan.

At their meeting Tuesday, Yolo supervisors made it clear they want to hit the ground running after the holiday furloughs.

'Now that the planning process is complete, I'd like to see some action, because we've been talking about this a long time,' said Supervisor Helen Thomson. 'That's really distressing to me.'

'It's time to stop writing reports,' she added. 'I'd like to see a real discussion about some real money going into some real housing.'

Her Davis colleague, Supervisor Jim Provenza, called the affordable housing stock 'dismal' in an interview Thursday. Living in Davis on minimum wage - 'it's next to impossible.' Conventional wisdom suggests spending no more than one-third of a person's income on rent, but some people are topping 50 percent, he said.

'We have a great need for housing that people at the lower end of the scale can afford,' Provenza said. 'If there's the slightest car repair ... or family emergency, it leads to an inability to pay rent.'

Building affordable housing is out of reach in the short term, however, due to a scarce funding in the economic downturn, DeJung said. In the meantime, the coalition is armed with \$1.6 million in federal stimulus money to keep at-risk renters from falling off the edge. The money will help people pay overdue rent and utility bills, repair shoddy credit, negotiate with landlords and stave off eviction through court battles.

'It allows people to go on with their lives without going through the trauma and expense

of homelessness,' DeJung said.

Moreover, stopping homelessness also saves taxpayer dollars by keeping would-be derelicts out of emergency rooms and jail.

'Once someone falls through all the safety nets, it's a much bigger problem,' DeJung said. 'Keeping them in housing just makes a lot of sense.'

Providing that safety net is just the first step, however. The plan also aims to boost the chronically homeless into jobs and affordable housing over the plan's lifespan.

But finding a place to live often means hitting a lot of targets first, like getting a job; getting a handle on mental illness or substance abuse; and finding a way to get around Yolo County's 1,021 square miles - all big hurdles.

For example, if you're homeless in Davis, but you have to fill a prescription in Woodland, that's a problem if you don't have a car, DeJung said. 'Getting around the county isn't super-convenient,' she said.

The plan calls for services to cope, but there's no funding lined up.

'This is a 10-year plan,' she continued. 'Some pieces will start moving right now, and some pieces will take a couple of years.'

A key fixture of the plan are Housing Resource Centers, which HomeBase wants to get up and running right away. The centers would piggyback on existing social service providers, such as Davis Community Meals, and serve as a clearinghouse of information.

Right now, a homeless person might seek help at a police station, a church or city hall, and 'they often get a print-out of 26 resources and phone numbers they can call,' DeJung said. After that, it's up to them to find out they might not be eligible for benefits because they're not a disabled veteran or a child ages 1 to 5.

'It's quite a burden to go through all those ... to figure out what resources are available, to find out where they fit,' she said.

Local officials want help the homeless get help by plugging the gap. That means funding a part-time position at Davis Community Meals, an employee who would be a one-stop-shop providing homeless people with an overview of the benefits they could get.

'They're already in crisis,' DeJung said. 'This just moves them forward in the process and saves everyone a lot of time and effort.'

HomeBase is marshaling Yolo County residents and organizations to support the plan.

"It's important because the plan won't move forward unless there's community

commitment,' DeJung said. To view the plan and the endorsement form, visit http://homebaseccc.org/pages/Hot_Topics/tenyearplanning.html.

The plan, DeJung added, 'requires commitment from as many people as possible.'

- Reach Jonathan Edwards at jedwards@davisenterprise.net or (530) 747-8052. Comment on this article at www.davisenterprise.com