

Request: Grants and ongoing funding to support local government efforts to reduce homelessness.

Description: As California continues to face a severe housing shortage and increased cost of living, the current homelessness crisis continues to escalate across the State. In Merced County and its cities, there are approximately 636 homeless individuals, which is an increase of 29 compared to the previous year, according to the Continuum of Care's 2020 Homeless Point-in-Time Count and Survey Report.

This is an issue that can't be addressed by one agency alone. As part of a collaborative effort, Merced County is working with its six cities and the Continuum of Care to develop a Regional Homelessness Plan that focuses on a variety of key areas, including outreach and engagement, navigation services and transitional housing, long-term supportive housing, and the system supports needed to coordinate these activities. The development of this plan will better position the County and its partners to access State and Federal funding dedicated to addressing the statewide homelessness crisis. This is part of a long-term goal to address and resolve chronic homelessness in Merced County through a holistic approach as opposed to a patchwork of scattered services.

While there is much work to be done, Merced County and its partners have already taken several steps to help manage the situation. The County has created an "Encampment Task Force" to improve coordination between agencies when responding to homeless encampments, helped orchestrate the opening of the "New Direction Outreach and Engagement Center" to bring together County and community-based organizations to better address homeless needs, and recently finished construction of a permanent Navigation Center to connect homeless individuals with available resources. The 15,000 square-foot facility was constructed from modified shipping containers to save money, cut down on construction time, and provide for a versatile and modern look. The County contracted with the Merced Rescue Mission to manage the new facility, which is operating 24/7.

The Navigation Center serves as a low-barrier emergency sheltering option for individuals currently residing in public spaces, and other places not suitable for human habitation. This initial step transitioning individuals out of homelessness includes providing a safe and service-rich temporary shelter with connections to onsite supportive services. Clients are assigned a case manager. The goal is to link Navigation Center clients to permanent supportive and affordable housing units as quickly as possible, while simultaneously working on barriers to sustainability such as lack of income and behavioral health challenges. This new facility compliments the nearby "D Street Homeless Shelter," which houses 60 individuals a night with an aim toward permanent housing, leading to an average of 40 permanent homeless placements a year. The total cost of the Navigation Center was approximately \$6.8 million and will require nearly \$1.8 million annually to operate.

As part of the regional approach to addresses homelessness countywide, Merced County has also contracted with the Merced Rescue Mission to provide distributive housing units, or mini navigation centers, in other communities such as Los Banos, Livingston, and Atwater. Each distributive housing unit provides approximately 6-8 additional shelter beds. Similar to the Navigation Center, the distributive houses serve as low-barrier emergency or temporary shelter. Case management and onsite services are provided along with connection to community resources. Currently, six units have been secured and are operational. The annual operational expense for each distributive housing unit is approximately \$100,000.

Furthermore, the City of Merced is working on an affordable housing project just down the street from the recently-opened Navigation Center. "The Childs Court Apartments," when constructed, will house 30 extremely-low and 88 low-income individuals and families, plus an on-site manager, for a total of 119 units, comprised of one, two, and three-bedroom apartments. The 30 units for extremely low-income individuals are intended for permanent supportive housing to successfully help house up to 30 of our local homeless. The development will be located on a 4-acre parcel at the northwest corner of East Childs Avenue and B Street, and will also feature a courtyard-style community with amenities such as solar energy covered carports and vehicle charging stations, a swimming pool, resident gardening area, laundry facilities, and a family play/barbeque/patio area. Additionally, a 3,890-square-foot community center will include common area, fitness, and multipurpose rooms, as well as manager and service provider office spaces. This project is currently under construction and is expected to be completed in the spring of 2022.

Off-site, the project brings public improvements in the form of full street improvements on the entirety of B Street, including new bike lanes, repaving, street lights, new/replaced sidewalks, curbs, and gutters, crosswalks, street trees, and water main. At the corner of E. Childs and B Street, a new storm water basin will be installed, and the corner will also include a small park for the neighborhood. New bike lanes will also be added to E. 13th and E. 15th Streets, and sharrow markings will be added to D Street and E Street. Installation of the off-site public improvements is expected to finish by summer of 2023.

In Los Banos, Merced County (as the Continuum of Care's designated administrative entity) received funds to operate a non-congregate shelter at a local motel. The County has contracted with the Merced County Community Action Agency to operate the facility serving up to 30 individuals living in encampments in the City, with 24/7 supportive services. These include case management, meals, housing placement, mental health support and employment services. The facility is funded through Jan. 31, 2022. The cost to fund the project for 9 months is approximately \$1.4 million. Additional measures are underway to potentially locate a permanent site and expand bed space.

Necessity: Although Merced County and its cities have taken several steps in the right direction, one concern remains regarding the viability of these actions: long-term funding. Several one-time resources have been made available to local jurisdictions, but without a sustainable plan involving state and federal resources, maintaining these efforts will prove to be a challenge.

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