

CITY OF MERCED

"Gateway to Yosemite"



OFFICE OF THE MAYOR
(209) 385-6834 • (209) 723-1780 FAX

October 17, 2016

Brian L. McCabe, Presiding Judge
Merced County Superior Court
627 West 21st Street
Merced, CA 95340

RE: Response to the 2015-2016 Merced County Civil Grand
Jury Report Entitled "Merced County's Efforts to End
Homelessness"

Dear Judge McCabe:

On July 21, 2016, the Merced County Civil Grand Jury ("MCCGJ") issued its report entitled *Merced County's Efforts to End Homelessness*. This report focused on the MCCGJ's investigation of the contract with Urban Initiatives ("UI") and the efforts that have been made concerning homelessness. As requested by the 2015-2016 MCCGJ, I am writing you on behalf of the Merced City Council to formally respond to the Recommendations contained in the report. The City Council has reviewed this response and authorized that it be sent at their October 17, 2016, meeting.

As set forth in the MCCGJ's report, in 2011, the Merced County Board of Supervisors adopted a ten-year plan to fight homelessness in the County. The implementation of this plan was assigned to the Merced County Association of Governments, who along with the County and the City of Merced ("City"), contracted with Urban Initiatives ("UI") for the purpose of obtaining state and federal funding

and support to combat homelessness within the County. As noted in the Report, Merced County and the City funded the UI contract. UI assisted with the formation of the Continuum of Care (“CoC”), which is a countywide committee comprised of volunteers from various non-profit agencies whose purpose is to engage all agencies in our community that have services to offer to the homeless. The MCCGJ found that UI’s involvement greatly increased the participation in the CoC by government agencies, non-profits and other organizations. The MCCGJ commended UI, CoC, the United Way of Merced County and the Merced Rescue Mission for their efforts. In addition, the City and County were also commended for their efforts in initiating a constructive program for dealing with the homelessness issue.

The Report contains two recommendations for which the MCCGJ seeks a response from the Merced City Council. The City appreciates the Commendation by the MCCGJ for our efforts to combat homelessness and provides the following information in response to the Recommendations in the Report:

RECOMMENDATIONS

- “R1. The MCCGJ recommends that the various organizations that are involved in dealing with homelessness in Merced County continue their outstanding work and that local governments continue to increase their support to address this issue and provide support to the CoC.
- R2. The MCCGJ recommends that the City of Merced and Merced County continue to seek funds from federal and state government agencies that can be used to provide aid in combating homelessness in our area.”

RESPONSE

In 2016, the City, through a Community Development Block Grant (CDBG), provided funding to the United Way of Merced County in the amount of \$38,000 to assist with the operation of the CoC. The City also continues to provide assistance to the homeless population and

actively seeks funding from state and federal sources to combat homelessness in our City. Accordingly, the Recommendations contained in the Report have already been implemented by the City. A summary of the City's contemporary efforts in this regard are described below.

The Mayor's Challenge to End Veteran Homelessness

In January 28, 2015, the annual Merced County homeless count revealed that there were 88 homeless veterans in our community. That number reduced 71.5% in 2016 when the annual count indicated that there were 25 homeless veterans in our community. With the goal of honoring the service of veterans by ensuring that all unsheltered veterans in the City are provided with stable housing, in June 2016, the City joined a nationwide federal program called the Mayor's Challenge to End Veteran Homelessness. To meet this challenge, the City is working on the federal level with the U.S. Department of Veteran's Affairs, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development and the U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness. On the local level, the City is working with the CoC and local veteran service providers to end homelessness among local veterans. A copy of the City's letter committing to this program and materials detailing the City's plan to accomplish its goal of ending homelessness among veterans is attached to this Response.

Community Development Block Grant Awards

As set forth in further detail in the City's 2016 HUD Annual Action Plan, the City has committed the following CDBG funds to assist with the needs of homeless families and individuals:

Recipient	Program	Amount	Purpose
Merced County Rescue Mission	Room at the Inn	\$200,000	Purchase of a property to provide housing to homeless families.
Merced County Rescue Mission	SOAR Case Management Program	\$8,000	Establish a SOAR case management program for the CoC to assist with community mental health services.
Merced County Rescue Mission	Rental Deposit Assistance	\$20,000	Assist with rental deposits for homeless individuals

Merced County Rescue Mission	Warming Center	\$15,000	Continuation and expansion of warming center services to homeless
Sierra Saving Grace	Housing Acquisition	\$167,000	Acquisition of a duplex or a single family dwelling for use by homeless
Sierra Saving Grace	Supportive Housing	\$7,500	Operation of a support housing project
Alliance for Community Transformations	Homeless prevention program	\$10,000	Development of a homeless prevention program for victims of domestic violence and their family members
Housing Authority for Merced County	Rental Deposit Assistance	\$30,000	Rental deposit program for homeless and those at risk of homelessness
United Way of Merced County	Funding for CoC	\$38,000	Funding for CoC

The City, its partner agencies and community organizations are committed to providing assistance to the homeless population living in our community. The City will continue to seek other funding opportunities from federal and state government agencies that can be used to provide aid in combating homelessness in our area.

Please feel free to contact City Manager Steve Carrigan if you desire any additional information or have any questions regarding this response to the MCCGJ Report.

Sincerely,

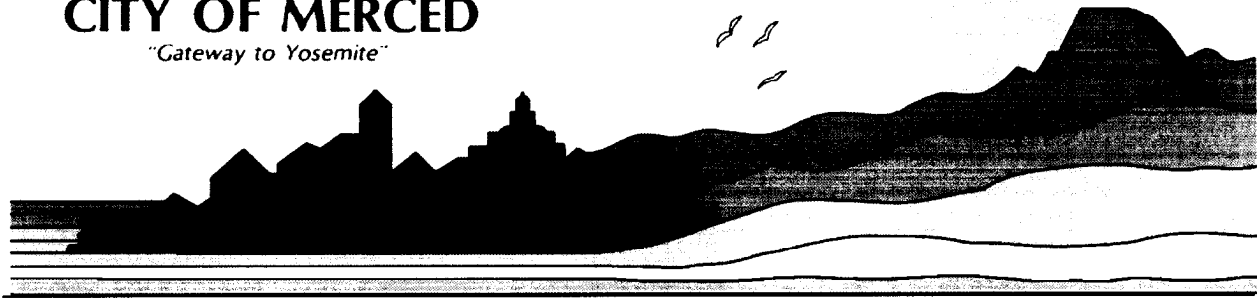
STANLEY P. THURSTON
Mayor

Cc: Members of the Merced City Council
Steve Carrigan, City Manager

Attachments: Letter Joining Mayor's Challenge to End Homelessness

CITY OF MERCED

"Gateway to Yosemite"



City of Merced Housing Division

Telephone (209) 385-6863

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June 6, 2016

Honorable Robert A. McDonald
Secretary of Veterans Affairs
U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs

Julián Castro
Secretary of Housing and Urban Development
U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development

Matthew Doherty
Executive Director
U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness

Dear Sirs:

The City of Merced is pleased to join nearly 1,000 other jurisdictions throughout the country who are committed to ending homelessness among veterans in their community as outlined in Opening Doors, the nation's first comprehensive federal strategy to prevent and end homelessness.

The Merced County 2016 Homeless Count and Survey revealed that there were 25 homeless veterans on January 28. The previous year, the homeless count noted that there were 88 homeless veterans which represents a 71.5% decrease.

The Housing Authority of the County of Merced (HACM) recently received 11 more U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development-VA Supportive Housing (HUD-VASH) Program vouchers. This brings the total number of vouchers received by HACM to 66. In addition, the WestCare Foundation's San Joaquin Valley Veterans (SJVV) program administers the Supportive Services for Veteran Families (SSVF) Program for homeless and at risk of becoming homeless veterans.

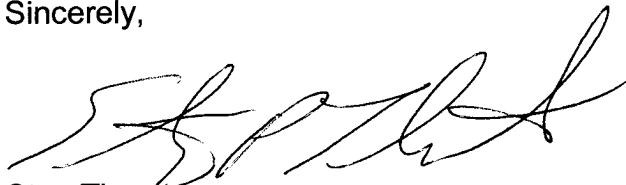
The City of Merced has established a partnership with the Merced City and County Continuum of Care (CoC) which consists of a wide-range of public and private organizations, including veteran service providers, in order to finish the job of preventing and ending homelessness among local veterans. The partnership focuses on the "No More Homeless Vets in Merced Task Force (Task Force)."

The primary responsibility of the Task Force is to identify and permanently house all homeless veterans by the end of 2016 by implementing the best practices of Housing First and Rapid Rehousing through the HUD-VASH, SSVF, and other programs operated by the CoC. Any veterans encountered during the 2017 homeless count and survey will be immediately engaged so that they will be able to end their experience of homelessness.

The City of Merced and the CoC will continue to implement the best practices in order to rapidly rehouse any veterans who become homeless after the 2017 homeless count and survey. The goal will be to rehouse them within 30 days as encouraged by the VA, HUD, and ICH.

Thus, it is with great pleasure that I submit to you, on behalf of the City Council and our residents, our city's commitment to end veteran homelessness in writing. Please know that the Mayor and Council will distribute a press release to the general public as noted and encouraged by the VA, HUD, and ICH within the Mayors Challenge to End Veteran Homelessness web site. Should you or your staff have any questions or comments, please contact me at (209) 385-6834.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Stan Thurston', written in a cursive style.

Stan Thurston
Mayor, City of Merced

Cc: Steve S. Carrigan, City Manager
Joe Colletti, Urban Initiatives
Carol Bowman, Director United Way
Frank Quintero, Director of Economic Development
Mark Hamilton, Housing Program Supervisor

No More Homeless Vets in Merced

Ending Homelessness among Unsheltered Veterans in Merced County: The Number of Unsheltered Veterans is less but what will it take to finish the job?

-prepared by Joe Colletti, PhD and Sofia Herrera, PhD, Institute for Urban Initiatives-

The primary purpose of this report is to focus on the following formalized question—what types of housing, resources, and tactics are essential to finish the job of ending homelessness among veterans in Merced County?

The multi-faceted answer is first outlined as follows:

- Direct the HUD-VASH voucher program, which combines Housing Choice Voucher (HCV) rental assistance for eligible homeless Veterans with case management and clinical services provided by the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), towards chronically homeless veterans and particularly for those who are the most visibly homeless, hardest-to-reach, and most likely to die on the streets;
- Use the Housing First and a “low barrier” approach while implementing the HUD-VASH voucher program. The Housing First approach focuses on providing permanent supportive housing as quickly as possible and then providing home-based supportive services, instead of requiring veterans to earn their housing by first entering shelters and meeting the program criteria with the likelihood of being discharged back to the streets;
- Direct the Supportive Services for Veteran Families (SSVF) Program, which provides outreach and case management services and assists eligible veterans to obtain VA benefits and other public benefits, towards non-chronically homeless veterans and chronically homeless when appropriate;
- Use the Rapid Rehousing best practice while implementing the Supportive Services for Veteran Families (SSVF) Program, which helps families and individuals quickly move out of homelessness and into affordable permanent housing, by providing services that help them obtain and maintain their housing such as housing search and landlord negotiation, short-term financial and rental assistance, and the delivery of home-based housing stabilization services as needed;
- Provide bridge housing, which is different from shelter that requires participants to earn their housing by meeting and maintaining program criteria. A Housing First and Low Barrier approach is implemented to rapidly rehouse and prevent participants from being discharged to the streets while receiving HUD-VASH voucher and SSVF program assistance during their stay in bridge housing;
- Provide housing navigation services to participants who are receiving HUD-VASH voucher and SSVF program assistance during their stay in bridge housing;
- HUD-VASH voucher and SSVF program assistance is largely focused on the City of Merced because a significant majority of unsheltered veterans in the County are living on the city’s streets.

The appropriate intervention for all chronically homeless persons including veterans is subsidized permanent supportive housing with case management services that is obtained and maintained through a Housing First and Low Barrier approach.

This approach was recently outlined by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) during the 2015 Continuum of Care (CoC) Homeless Assistance Program grant application process by asking two specific questions.

A. Low Barriers

The first question, which focused on barriers that prevent potential participants from entering permanent housing including permanent supportive housing, was

“Based on the CoC's FY 2015 new and renewal project applications, what percentage of Permanent Housing (permanent supportive housing and rapid rehousing) . . . projects in the CoC are low barrier?”¹

HUD noted that this meant “. . . they do not screen out potential participants based on those clients possessing

- too little or little income,
- active or history of substance use,
- criminal record, with exceptions for state-mandated restrictions, and
- history of having been or currently a victim of domestic violence (e.g., lack of a protective order, period of separation from abuser, or law enforcement involvement).”²

HUD further stated that

“Many recipients of CoC Program and ESG Program funds place more stringent requirements for entry into a program than what HUD requires and this can create barriers for those homeless persons who already have the most barriers and who would be considered the hardest-to-serve. As we continue to shift toward a paradigm of ending homelessness, it is increasingly important that CoC Program-funded projects eliminate barriers to serving people experiencing homelessness.”³

Consequently, project applicants were asked to indicate their alignment with a low barrier philosophy by indicating that they were staying away from the following list of barriers,

¹ “Detailed Instructions for Completing the FY 2015 Continuum of Care (CoC) Application,” p. 62.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

stability and prevent returns to homelessness as opposed to addressing predetermined treatment goals prior to permanent housing entry.”⁵

Project applicants provided their responses based on the following three questions, which included specific instructions from HUD:

- **“Does the project quickly move participants into permanent housing?** Select ‘Yes’ to this question if your project will quickly move program participants into permanent housing without intermediary steps or a period of qualification before permanent housing. Select ‘No’ if the project does not work to move program participants quickly into permanent housing.”
- **“Has the project removed the following barriers to accessing housing and services? (Select ALL that apply):** Check the box next to each item to confirm that your project has removed (or never had) barriers to program access related to each of the following: 1) Having too little or little income; 2) Active or history of substance abuse; 3) Having a criminal record with exceptions for state-mandated restrictions; and 4) Fleeing domestic violence (e.g., lack of a protective order, period of separation from abuser, or law enforcement involvement). If all of these barriers to access still exist, select None of the above’.”
- **“Has the project removed the following as reasons for program termination?** Check the box next to each item to confirm that your project has removed (or never had) reasons for program participant termination related to each of the following: 1) Failure to participate in supportive services; 2) Failure to make progress on a service plan; 3) Loss of income or failure to improve income; 4) Fleeing domestic violence; and 5) Any other activity not covered in a lease agreement typically found in the project’s geographic area. If all of these reasons for program termination still exist select ‘None of the above’.”

If the answers were affirmative to each of the questions, the following question “Does the project follow a Housing First approach” was automatically populated as “yes.” HUD also noted that

“This field is automatically calculated and cannot be edited. **Only if** “Yes” was answered for 4a **AND** all of the barriers and reasons boxes were checked for 4b and 4c, **will** this field indicate “Yes” to confirm a Housing First approach. Otherwise, this field will indicate “No” to confirm that the project will not follow a Housing First approach.”⁶

⁵ For renewal applications see “Detailed Instructions for Completing the Renewal Project Application: Fiscal Year 2015 Continuum of Care Program Application Process,” p. 17 and for new applications see “Detailed Instructions for Completing the New Project Application: Fiscal Year 2015 Continuum of Care Program Application Process,” p. 19.

⁶ Ibid, p. 20.

C. Bridge Housing

Bridge housing is temporary housing that is different from shelters that require participants to earn their housing by meeting and maintaining program criteria. Bridge housing requires participants to adhere to basic health and safety issues. However, bridge housing includes a Housing First and Low Barrier approach that prevents participants from being discharged to the streets because of the reasons noted in subsections A and B above.

Thus, if an unsheltered veteran qualifies for HUD-VASH or SSVF program assistance, the veteran is placed in bridge housing while a Housing Navigator identifies appropriate permanent housing as quickly as possible so that the veteran can receive home-based case management and supportive services in order to help the veteran maintain the housing.

D. Housing Navigation

Housing navigation consists of two primary activities: compiling an inventory of existing and new permanent housing units and moving veterans into the units as quickly as possible.

A Housing Navigator position needs to be created and funded in order to carry out the two primary activities. A Housing Navigator responsibilities should include

- Recruiting property owners and managers;
- Completing intake documentation;
- Assessing housing barriers, needs, and preferences;
- Matching appropriate housing resources (HUD-VASH, SSVF, S+C, CoC-PSH);
- Identifying and matching available housing units with homeless veterans;
- Setting up appointments to see available housing units;
- Assisting with transportation for homeless veterans to see available units;
- Assisting with submitting rental applications and understanding leases;
- Assisting with obtaining utilities and making moving arrangements; and
- Conducting follow-up to ensure veterans are maintaining housing.

E. Tactics

The primary tactics should be three-fold: 1) directing the resources; 2) ensuring accountability; and 3) rapidly rehousing any veterans who become homeless in the future.

Directing the resources

Directing the resources should include the following: