

MERCED COUNTY'S EFFORTS TO END HOMELESSNESS

Internal Investigation 15-08-17

SUMMARY

In May of 2011, the Merced County Board of Supervisors adopted a ten-year plan to combat homelessness in the county. They assigned the task of implementing this plan to the Merced County Association of Governments (MCAG). MCAG, along with the City of Merced and Merced County, contracted with Urban Initiatives (UI). This Southern California organization specializes in assisting counties and agencies to achieve compliance with federal and state qualifications in order to obtain funding and support to combat homeless issues within their jurisdiction. Under the advisement of UI, the Continuum of Care (CoC), a countywide committee made up of volunteers from many local organizations, was created to move the county's plan forward. The Merced County Civil Grand Jury (MCCGJ) elected to investigate UI's contract and what was being done in the County concerning homelessness.

BACKGROUND

The 2014-2015 MCCGJ voted to do an internal investigation concerning the homeless issue in Merced County. Due to time constraints, they referred this investigation to the 2015-2016 MCCGJ. In August 2015, the current MCCGJ voted to adopt this investigation.

METHODOLOGY

The MCCJG used the interview process to gather information on the issues presented. Several county and city representatives were interviewed, along with individuals from non-profit organizations that deal with the homeless issue in Merced County.

DISCUSSION

In order to obtain federal and state funding for homeless support services, the County is required to have an organized structure in place before applying for any grants.

MCAG was the first Collaborative Applicant (CA) assigned. MCAG, with the approval of the Board of Supervisors, contracted UI to provide Merced County with a grant inventory worksheet and a detailed budget requirement inventory necessary to apply for federal and state funds.

Merced County and the City of Merced funded the contract with UI in 2014. The mission of UI was to work with various jurisdictions to design a plan and then oversee the implementation of a system of care and affordable housing for the homeless.

UI assisted in the formation of the CoC. The CoC is comprised of non-profit agencies, local churches, MCAG, Veterans Affairs representatives, Mental Health representatives and UI. The

CoC's business model is to involve all the agencies that have services to offer the homeless. With the help of UI, the CoC was awarded two grants from The Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) in the amount of \$1.2 million for transitional housing, permanent supportive housing and the continued operation of the Homeless Management Information System.

UI has had two contracts with Merced County over the past two years. The contractual obligations of these contracts are the following:

- Assist the County in completing the annual HUD application for funding.
- Update the 10-year plan to end homelessness.
- Coordinate the homeless count and survey.
- Monitor various organizations that receive HUD funding through the CoC.
- Ensure federal guidelines are followed.

UI also assists the County with other aspects such as housing inventory charts, the annual homeless report and working with the CA.

According to the CoC, UI has greatly improved the participation and productivity of the homeless program by accomplishing the following since accepting the contract:

- The CoC committee increased attendance from approximately nine participants to an average of 50 to 60. These individuals represent close to 50 different agencies.
- A CoC board was established and meets quarterly.
- There are active sub-committees within the CoC.
- A governing charter has been established.
- Standards have been written.
- A pilot program has been initiated.
- A coordinated entry system is being established. This identifies an individual's or family's need for homeless assistance.
- The ten-year plan has been updated and includes solutions for implementation.

UI helped start the pilot program working with homeless veterans. The CoC's first goal was to deal with this issue. Many veterans have been assisted, and it is projected to have zero homeless veterans housed by the end of 2016. This pilot program has served as the vehicle for other programs to address homeless issues and clients.

UI's opinion is that the best practice is to conduct street outreach. Their approach is not to just provide a blanket, but to enter individuals into a program and get them off the streets. Mental health and other agencies are and will continue to be critical in the success of this program.

United Way of Merced County (UW) is a volunteer member of the CoC. While this investigation was being conducted, UW applied to be the new CA for Merced County. When interviewed, UW explained that HUD's model is to approach housing first. This means it is important to house people and get them off the streets. Individuals will then receive the services they need to maintain housing and become contributing members of society. This new approach to end homelessness is to get permanent supportive housing and then, if needed, have a case manager assist individuals to utilize any available services.

There are several non-profit charitable organizations that have proposed a "Village of Hope Project". This is a project that would provide housing and onsite support for individuals. Case managers and support services from multiple agencies would be located at the housing facility to assist individuals. HUD does not fully fund new housing projects. Therefore, to encourage investors and developers to become partners in a "Village of Hope Project", tax credits and incentives need to be provided to insure these types of projects can become a reality.

Currently, the Merced Rescue Mission has established a rapid re-housing program along with the Human Services Agency (HSA). During this investigation, the Housing of Merced County (HAMC) has made Section 8 vouchers available and has set aside a number for the CoC to use. Homeless veterans will be given preference.

Since the initial interviews were conducted, the MCCGJ learned that on March 1, 2016 the CoC applied for a \$660,000 grant (two years of funding). This money, if received, will allow the hiring of three full-time trained professionals who would work in the field to assist homeless individuals and families with available programs and services.

The MCCGJ also learned of two planned projects to assist in providing housing to the homeless:

1. A 37-unit facility located near Highway 99.
2. A 60 to 80-unit facility that would accommodate onsite services to be located in southeast Merced.

The City of Merced is also working to put ordinances in place that will make it more difficult for homeless to settle in common public areas. Ordinances of these types are already enforced in surrounding counties and cities.

Since the initial interviews, MCCGJ has learned that the CoC has organized a working group that is reaching out to local landlords in hopes of getting their support in developing permanent supportive housing for the homeless. The CoC has applied for local grants that will help with deposits and other issues that seem to be a hurdle between homeless occupants and local landlords.

This investigation began with looking at UI and its contract with the County and City of Merced. According to the CoC, UI has done an exemplary job in helping the County become compliant, and its director is to be commended in his participation in and contribution to the goals of the CoC. In the future, the CA's strategy is to reduce the hands-on participation by UI and transfer that responsibility to the CA. The knowledge of UI has been invaluable to the CoC, and they will continue to enlist UI's expertise.

FINDINGS

- F1. Since UI's involvement, participation in the CoC by government agencies, non-profits and other organizations has greatly increased. The CoC conducted its latest count of homeless individuals on January 28, 2016. This count involved over 170 volunteers walking in 28 zones throughout the County and talking one-on-one with individuals. They asked them a series of questions in order to determine their housing situation. This resulted in a more accurate count. The current count of homeless individuals in Merced County is 519.

RECOMMENDATION

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.

COMMENDATIONS

C1. The MCCGJ commends the following organizations for their diligent and hard work in combating homelessness in Merced County: The Continuum of Care, Urban Initiatives, The United Way of Merced County and The Merced Rescue Mission. There are also numerous individuals who have contributed endless hours of work in dealing with this problem, and the MCCGJ commends them for their efforts.

C2. The MCCGJ commends the City of Merced and Merced County for their efforts in initiating a constructive program for dealing with the homeless issue.

REQUESTED RESPONSES

Pursuant to Penal Code Section 933.05, the Civil Grand Jury request responses as follows

Merced County Board of Supervisors

Merced City Council

Merced County Association of Governments

INVITED RESPONSES

Merced County Collaborative Applicant

Merced County Continuum of Care

GLOSSARY

CA Collaborative Applicant

CoC Merced County Continuum of Care

HACM	Housing Authority of Merced County
HSA	Merced County Department of Human Services Agency
HUD	US Department of Housing and Urban Development
MCAG	Merced County Association of Governments
MCCGJ	Merced County Civil Grand Jury
UI	Urban Initiatives
UW	United Way of Merced County