

FRESNO ALLIANCE

Visalia Confronts Homelessness

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On Oct. 4, Community Services Employment Training (CSET) held a ribbon-cutting ceremony to celebrate the new Visalia Navigation Center (VNC). The facility is part of an enormous project that aims to offer “family housing solutions” for the Visalia community. The VNC is a low-barrier facility designed to offer comprehensive support for individuals experiencing homelessness. It will accommodate up to 100 beds, with separate areas for men, women and families.

The VNC will offer several vital services such as emergency shelter, including beds, showers and laundry facilities, and health services, from on-site mental healthcare and substance-abuse counseling to general medical care.

There will also be job training and employment services with case managers that can help residents find employment and provide job training. There will, of course, be basic amenities, such as warm meals, mail and phone services, a kennel for pets (one dog per person) and storage for residents’ personal belongings. In addition, the VNC aims to transition residents to long-term stable housing.

The VNC is the result of more than a dozen agencies coming together to serve their community. CSET is managing and operating the center, but TC HOPE spearheaded the project and helped

search for funds and Self-Help Enterprises donated the land. Also, the Visalia City Council approved \$5 million in zero-interest, forgivable loans and grants to fund construction in 2021.

Several government agencies will have workers on-site to assist. The VNC received funding from multiple sources to cover its construction and operational costs. The total cost of the project is around \$11 million for construction alone, and the cost of ongoing operations is estimated at \$1.5 million annually. The center was able to secure funding through a combination of federal and state grants, as well as contributions from many local organizations and donations.

Recently, Governor Gavin Newsom expressed frustration with many California cities for not fully utilizing the extensive funding the state has provided to address housing and homelessness. Despite his administration allocating more than \$40 billion for affordable housing and \$27 billion for homelessness relief, he believes that many cities have failed to implement the necessary housing projects or adhere to state mandates.

Newsom is particularly critical of cities that are delaying housing development or outright rejecting plans that could provide shelter for homeless residents. Because of this, Newsom's administration introduced stricter penalties, including fines of up to \$50,000 per month for cities that violate state housing laws.

Visalia, however, is trying to follow through with its promises. The City of Visalia has received federal funding through the Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) and HOME programs that were earmarked for projects including the VNC. These funds are part of the city's \$5.6 million CDBG allocation for various homelessness services, including the VNC's development.

As part of the state's effort to confront the housing crisis, the Newsom administration has allocated millions in Homeless Housing, Assistance and Prevention (HHAP) grants. A portion of these funds are benefiting projects such as the VNC. Indeed, the VNC received \$2.5 million through the HHAP program.

Tulare County's homeless population has seen a significant rise in recent years, along with the rest of the state. In 2023, the point-in-time count reported 1,053 individuals experiencing homelessness, a 16% increase from the previous year.

Although centers such as the VNC have the capability to change lives and help break the cycle of being unhoused, they can only do so much to keep up. Earlier this year, the U.S. Supreme Court in *Grants Pass v. Johnson* granted local governments more power to criminalize homelessness by allowing penalties such as tickets or even arrests for camping in public spaces, even if there are no shelter beds available.

This has essentially made it a criminal offense to simply exist as a homeless person. Cities such as Fresno have already passed anti-camping ordinances that criminalize camping or setting up tents in public spaces, particularly in sensitive areas such as near parks, schools and government buildings. These new laws make places like the VNC even more critical for people experiencing homelessness.

One of several speakers at the ribbon-cutting ceremony was Rep. Jim Costa (D-Fresno). He spoke of the serious need for places like the VNC. "I think it is challenging for all of us when we look at the crisis of homelessness in America. We see it all around us. Communities small and large and in between. We see it in rural areas.

“Homelessness is a crisis in America. The need for dealing with issues of substance abuse, the need of dealing with issues of mental health, the need of dealing with issues of abuse and all of these factors are usually a part of why people are homeless. And so having the shelter is critical.”

Ironically, Costa is one of the two sponsors of the Costa-Hawkins Rental Housing Act of 1995, a law that severely restricted rent control in California. This act has made it unnecessarily harder for cities to implement rent control measures that could have curbed the skyrocketing rents that have indirectly contributed to housing insecurity and homelessness across the state.

Projects such as the VNC are left to pick up the pieces and attempt to help communities that have been negatively impacted by such legislation.

The VNC, located at 3525 N. Court Street in Visalia, is expected to be open by early November. Individuals seeking assistance must apply through a coordinated entry system (call 1-800-283-9323). Beds are assigned and residents can stay at the center for up to 6–9 months. The VNC will not be taking walk-ins, so you must call.

Learn more about the VNC at info@cset.org or visit cset.org/vnc. Nonprofits and local organizations are encouraged to partner with the VNC through donations, funding or even holding workshops for guests.

The only way through, after all, is together.