

Feds call Fresno, Madera ‘a shining example’ in homelessness battle; local agencies say it’s not that simple

By Rory Appleton
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Federal officials heaped praise this month on Fresno and Madera counties for drastically reducing the number of homeless people in each region, but local groups say the issue is far from resolved.

U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development Western Region spokesman Ed Cabrera said the two counties saw a 34 percent reduction in total homelessness from 2014 to 2015 and about a 60 percent decrease over the past five years.

“I think Fresno is a shining example of what’s possible when folks work together around proven solutions,” he said. “Clearly, homelessness hasn’t ended. But with the level of progress in these numbers, I think we can learn a lot from how Fresno has gotten to this point.”

The numbers of sheltered, unsheltered and homeless families each fell in the one-year and five-year tallies. The number of homeless veterans also dropped 17 percent since last year and 63 percent since 2011.

Cabrera called special attention to the drops in chronic homelessness, which has fallen 58 percent since 2010 and 26 percent since last year.

Doreen Eley, manager of the assisted housing division for the Fresno Housing Authority, said her agency tabulates the numbers for the federal government. She defined chronic homelessness as “living in a place not meant for human habitation for a year or more, or four times in the last three years, plus having a disability that impacts daily life.”

69 percent

The decrease in homeless families in Fresno and Madera counties since 2010.

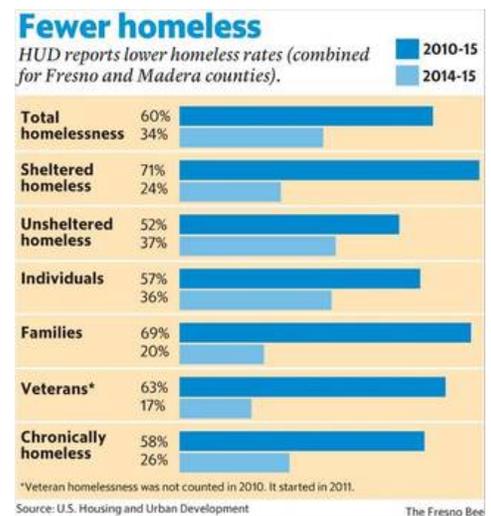
Although homeless rates are falling, Eley said the federal numbers aren’t perfect. The housing authority counts the number of homeless people in and out of shelters on odd years, but it only tracks those in shelters during even years. Federal officials also don’t count those who lost their homes but are staying with friends or family temporarily as homeless.

However, there’s no doubting Fresno and Madera counties have made tremendous strides.

“The key to success here in Fresno is collaboration,” Eley said. “We’ve stepped up our data usage in the last year with the MAP (Fresno Multi-Agency Access) program, and we’ve learned from other communities.”

The MAP program serves as a unified intake station for all of Fresno’s homeless. It’s housed at the Poverello House in downtown Fresno. Anyone can come in and register.

Registrants’ names, pictures, basic information and needs are entered into one database. From there, the person could be sent to dozens of outreach programs through the city, county, hospitals or various partner organizations, such as the Fresno Rescue Mission or Poverello House.



“It’s about finding the best housing intervention for you,” Eley said. “Some need a lot of services, while others are just down on their luck and need a mainstream housing situation.”

The housing authority owns 118 units and partner organizations have hundreds more available, but Eley said housing is never available as soon as the next day. Many homeless individuals must stay in temporary shelters or on the streets until the program can locate a home.

Housing is determined by need, Eley said. Those with serious physical or mental disabilities or who’ve been on the street for a while are given the highest priority. Housing everyone who registers through MAP isn’t yet feasible, she added.

Brandy Johnson, a spokeswoman for the housing agency, said an increased sensitivity to mental health issues was a big reason for Fresno’s improvement in lowering homeless rates. Fresno County Department of Behavioral Health staff members are present at each of the authority’s three complexes.

“First, we provide people housing – get them stable,” she said. “Then we can get them substance abuse or mental health counseling. As a community, we’ve finally realized that.”

Rev. Larry Arce is the CEO of the Fresno Rescue Mission, a faith-based organization created in 1949 that temporarily houses 80 to 150 people per night.

We don’t want to put a Band-Aid on (homelessness). We want to help where the rubber meets the road.

Larry Arce, CEO of the Fresno Rescue Mission

He agreed that an increase in city, county and nonprofit programs have reduced the amount of people looking for housing help, but he believes a large number of people – many of the “visible” homeless – are taking advantage of these expanded programs.

“Vagrancy is a problem,” he said. “Some people are temporarily homeless, but some have been homeless for a decade. They’re very capable of working or living alone, but they want to take advantage.”

The Fresno Rescue Mission runs a program for helping the homeless find work and lodging. It involves faith-based courses, but Arce said no one is required to follow any specific religion to join. They do, however, have to be sober.

“We usually send them to detox, then they come back here,” he said. “A lot of them leave after a week or so of being drug free. But they just end up back here again.”

Arce said some people feel entitled and are not willing to follow even the most basic program rules.

He cautioned people to “think twice” before giving money to anyone on the street.

“I saw a man on Clinton and Marks in a motorized wheelchair. He had a sign saying he was diabetic and needed help. He came into the doughnut shop I was in and popped right out of the wheelchair. He said he was actually doing fine. I asked how much he makes, and he told me \$800 to \$1,000 a day.”

However, Arce was proud of the community’s progress. He also praised Fresno agencies and nonprofits for their collaboration. Most homeless people, he added, are looking for some help in a time of need.

“The temporarily homeless get on track right away,” he said. “You have to want to fix things. We don’t give up on people, but they’ve got to meet us halfway.”

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