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Shelter from the storm

The Farm provides a needed sanctuary for area homeless, but many question its safety

By [Meredith J. Cooper](#)

For Christa Stevens and Larry Robison, determining their next meal—and one for Butters the pit bull, too—isn't as simple as bringing a shopping list to the grocery store or picking up fast food. And finding a consistent place to lay their heads at night is no easy task. Around Thanksgiving, that changed when they were invited to camp out on a piece of land being leased by Joel Castle, a local advocate for medical marijuana patients and the homeless community.



Christa Stevens and Larry Robison, with pup Butters, keep dry under an awning at an unpermitted homeless camp in south Chico.

PHOTO BY MEREDITH J. COOPER

“We’re just trying to get people out of the weather,” Robison said during a recent visit to the camp, which had been deluged like the rest of Chico, its dirt paths turned to thick mud.

Originally envisioned as a small farm with goats and chickens and a garden, it’s now home to about 40 people, most of whom reside in tents; some in small camper vehicles; and others, like Robison and Stevens, in a small corrugated metal structure on the property. A portable toilet serves their bathroom needs.

The spot, along Comanche Creek near Neighborhood Church, is largely off the beaten path. Still, there are neighbors and some have complained, prompting city Code Enforcement to visit the property and alert Castle and his landlord, Ted Ball, that it’s not zoned for camping. Castle has been cited twice and eviction proceedings are underway, according to Leo DePaola, Chico building official and head of Code Enforcement. (A call to the attorney representing Ball was not returned by press time.)

“It’s an unfortunate situation because the people down there have nowhere to go,” DePaola said. “But we’ve never received any proposal from him [Castle].”

Indeed, homeless housing is in short supply. The Torres Community Shelter has filled about 122 of its 140 beds of late, and Safe Space, Chico’s winter shelter that rotates among area churches, is at capacity.

“We have to have some place for people to go who can’t get into the Torres Shelter or into Safe Space, or for various reasons aren’t a good fit for those facilities,” said Leslie Johnson, secretary for CHAT (Chico Housing Action Team), which runs Safe Space. “We have been turning people away and that’s very upsetting to us.”

During a recent visit to The Farm, as it’s known, Robison sat in a camping chair alongside his girlfriend, Stevens, and about 10 others inside a makeshift shelter that was keeping out most of the torrential rain. It was breakfast time, and Stevens placed a handful of chocolate Pop Tarts on the grill to warm them before passing them around.

“Just living out here, it’s a full-time job,” Robison said.

Much of the food sitting on a nearby table had been donated, Stevens said, as had a nice, large tent that they hope to be “home base” once the weather lets up.

The mood was generally morose around camp, as one man explained why he doesn’t take advantage of the Torres Shelter—he’s had bad experiences there in the past. Robison said he and Stevens prefer to camp because they can be together—instead of in separate men’s/women’s dormitories at Torres—and they can be with Butters. Others talked about getting camping tickets before they came to The Farm, but expressed concern that they’d be evicted any day.

“You’d think they’d be happy about it,” Robison said, “because we’re not downtown passed out in the streets.”

For Castle’s part, he opened the property to others in order to give them a place that’s their own. “They are free with dignity—while Safe Space or Torres Center shelters are totally monitored, they are not on The Farm; forced to sleep right next to God knows who at either place, but not at The Farm,” he said. “They have the freedom to move with an open door/gate 24/7. This is the way to treat them—not like cattle.”

Most of the people contacted for this story said they support Castle’s idea of a tent city, if not his methods of creating one, if for no other reasons than it can provide a modicum of safety, some relief from inclement weather and a basic level of services. But there are concerns that its unregulated and unpermitted status could endanger its residents. Over the weekend, a huge tree along the creek came crashing down, leveling a couple of tents that were unoccupied.

“Generally, I have a concern for the health and safety of unregulated private camps,” Councilman Karl Ory said in an email. “The answer is more emergency shelter and generally expanded rental opportunities. For every homeless person, there is a single mom with two kids whose whole paycheck goes towards rent.”

Fellow Councilman Randall Stone, who chairs the Greater Chico Homeless Task Force and volunteers with Safe Space, had a similar take. “Flagrantly disregarding the law, appearing to

deviate from lease terms, and straining efforts to find solutions doesn't do anybody any good," he said by email, but added that the extreme weather we've been having made him grateful that some people had a place to go.

Moving forward, the City Council is scheduled to discuss the issue of homelessness at its next meeting (Jan. 17). Johnson also said a plan is in the works under the auspices of CHAT to build a legitimate homeless camp in Chico. In the meantime, an emergency shelter option should be considered, she said.

"Setting up a short-term emergency shelter is very necessary; it's something the city and county should be doing," she said. "Because the way things are now, people can very easily die outside, especially many of the homeless people who are compromised in terms of their health already."