

The Homeless

Sacramento County will place homeless people in 15 rentals rather than central shelter

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Update (Nov. 14): The Sacramento County Board of Supervisors on Tuesday unanimously approved using 15 locations throughout the county to serve homeless people rather than create a full-service central location.

After months of developing plans for a San Francisco-style “full service” homeless shelter housing 75 men and women under one roof, Sacramento County staff are recommending – at least in the short-term – a plan to put those homeless people in 15 rental homes scattered across the county.

The original plan, approved by county supervisors in March, was to create a “Full Service Rehousing Shelter” – a 75-bed, dormitory-style facility with indoor and outdoor space on a large lot, with good access to transportation in a compatible neighborhood. The shelter was intended to help homeless people transition to jobs, permanent housing and public benefits.

Unlike at other shelters, the county would allow homeless people to bring their pets, partners and personal items to encourage them to stay in housing rather than seek independence on the streets.

But county officials could never find a location that fit the bill after evaluating 50 sites, including county and private properties, according to a staff report ahead of a Board of Supervisors discussion scheduled for Tuesday. Sacramento County staff earlier this year would not identify which neighborhoods or sites were evaluated when asked by The Sacramento Bee.

“Given the lack of available or suitable options within the limits of the budget, staff explored the use of leased rental properties to create a scattered site interim housing model,” wrote Ann Edwards, the county’s director of the Department of Human Assistance. “Use of this approach can effectively address short-term sheltering needs with a quick startup time and a reasonable cost.”

The shelter plan is just one of several new county initiatives intended to address a growing homeless population. Last week, the county approved a plan to spend \$44 million over the next three years to provide services to homeless people, including drug and mental health treatment.

In March, the county approved a package of four programs aimed at easing the homeless crisis. In addition to launching the Full Service Rehousing Shelter, supervisors voted to redesign the family emergency shelter system, sustain longstanding programs at risk of losing federal dollars and launch a Flexible Supportive Housing Program that pairs housing with mental health services and addiction treatment for those facing the biggest obstacles.

The programs were expected to cost the county \$5.6 million in the current budget year and \$8.3 million annually after that. The county budgeted \$2.35 million for the first year of the rehousing center, with an expectation of spending \$1.65 million a year to operate it.

Board of Supervisors Chairman Don Nottoli, along with Supervisor Phil Serna, toured San Francisco’s Navigation Center in March, seeing it as a model for what Sacramento County

could accomplish. He said the consolidated approach creates some efficiencies by having intake and transportation all in one place.

But with winter coming and the county unable to find one central location, switching gears to scattered housing makes sense, he said.

“I think it’s important to do something now,” Nottoli said. “We are moving into the cold and rainy season. I think we ought to jump in and go with this.”

Under the scattered approach, the county would reach agreements with providers to house five homeless people each in 15 locations across the county. An in-home monitor would work at each site. Residents would receive transportation to appointments. Compared to the full service center, the scattered model would have lower initial costs and a faster ramp-up time, officials said.

The county staff report says “careful measures are taken to ensure neighborhood compatibility.” These include informing neighbors beforehand and prohibiting “loitering in front of the residence and other potentially troubling behaviors that could disturb neighbors.”

The county sees positives, such as smaller shelters being more appealing to youth, women, veterans and the LGBTQ population – as well as those who want to stay close to their existing neighborhoods. But the staff report also notes that the scattered approach could lead to more potential neighborhood opposition and increase coordination work for case managers and staff trying to help homeless people.

No potential locations have been provided for the scattered shelters.

Sacramento Self-Help Housing used the same model through a city grant to get 168 people off the streets earlier this decade. The program was phased out after officials faced difficulty finding enough permanent beds for people once they graduated from the program, said John Foley, executive director of Sacramento Self-Help Housing.

“It worked great,” Foley said. While it took longer than hoped, nearly 60 percent of participants found permanent housing as a result of the program. Around one-third went back to the streets, six went to detox, five went to jail and three died in the home, Foley said.

“They were taking in the most vulnerable people,” Foley said. Sacramento Self-Help Housing continues to provide housing for hundreds of formerly homeless residents.

He said he always preferred small housing situations, as opposed to one big center for the homeless.

“If people are homeless in Arden Arcade, it’s nice to have a place in Arden Arcade they can stay,” Foley said.