

Development forces West Sacramento to clear out longtime homeless camp

More than 100 staff and volunteers helped usher 63 residents, with their 28 dogs and 12 cats, into a nearby motel.

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The riverbank near West Sacramento's Broderick Boat Ramp is no stranger to drugs, vandalism and endless amounts of garbage. But it's also evolved into a fairly stable homeless community, with many residents establishing veritable homesteads.

Steve Kruse, who functions as "mayor" of the campsite gathering, has lived there for more than 17 years. "Being off the grid is nicer than people think," he says.

Last week, on November 12, his neighborhood came to an end.

Bright and early Wednesday, homeless individuals encamped along the Sacramento River's North Levee area packed up tents, loaded belongings onto anything with wheels and rustled into line.

It was all part of the Bridge to Housing pilot project, a "housing first" solution to homelessness that focuses on getting people under roofs.

The goal: get homeless people indoors immediately—in this case, at a local motel—and then work to address their unique needs. After 120 days, officials will condemn the motel, and this qualifies the residents for housing vouchers.

"It's very ambitious," says Bob Erlenbusch, executive director of the Sacramento Regional Coalition to End Homelessness. He calls the project a "humanistic response" compared to previous homeless sweeps, which amounted to a few days' notice before forcible removal by law enforcement.

The project hatched when Ethan Conrad Properties purchased a parcel near the boat ramp in August. Property manager Ryan McGinnis said it was his job to "get the people off the land, and try to do it as humanely as possible."



Tabitha Cottrell comforts her pup, Izabella, during a health check last week. West Sacramento's transitional-housing plan allows pets to live with formerly homeless residents.

First line of order was to call the police. West Sac Police Chief Tom McDonald enlisted Ryan Collins from United Christian Centers to direct a coalition of advocates and service providers from West Sac and Yolo County. Collins communicated with and assessed the needs of the North Levee population.

Carina Mesa was working most of the time when Collins came by the homeless encampment. She'd found herself living on the riverbank when cutbacks at Round Table Pizza, where she has worked for more than a decade, meant she couldn't afford an apartment. Now, she was wait-listed at the motel.

But she wasn't deterred. She hustled to claim her place in the check-in line well before 7 a.m., hoping for a seat on the bus to the motel. "Whoever doesn't take it serious enough," she said, "I'll take their spot."

A slot in the program meant new underwear, clean clothes and something many consider a luxury: a hot shower. Residents were also given mental and physical health assessments, flu shots and a meal.

Getting on that bus wasn't easy for everyone. Serjuan Jimenez, a two-year resident of the camp, spent most of that morning looking for her missing cat, Papas, instead of standing in line. "I'm not afraid of being arrested. I'm not leaving without my cat," she said.

Unlike most homeless housing options, animal companions are allowed to stay with their owners at the motel.

Not everyone was happy about the project. Jeff Lyon, a resident who lost his recent West Sac City Council bid, has been vocal about what he considers the city's capitulating to a wealthy developer's demands. Lyon insists "the public's being fooled" by a plan to give the homeless a "vacation in a motel."

And no one knows if the project will work. Collins said he'll track participants through agencies providing the permanent supportive housing and other services, and a UC Davis student has been contracted to analyze project data.

For the developer, success means keeping the North Levee area free of illegal campers. ECP signed a \$50,000 contract to clear the property of low-hanging branches and excess brush—anything that can be used as shelter—to dissuade people from returning to the area.

At the end of the day, more than 100 staff and volunteers helped usher 63 residents, with their 28 dogs and 12 cats, under a new roof. Collins said Jimenez did make it to the motel, though it's not clear if she ever found Papas.