



HOUSING ACTION

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Groundbreakers



Pictured at the site of CHAT's future affordable housing complex in west Chico (left to right): Brandon Slater and son Revin, Jim Stevens, Bob Trausch, Sarah Graham, Kevin Easterling, Pat Conroy and Lizzy Young.

by Melissa Daugherty

Robert Trausch became acutely aware of Chico's shortage of affordable and accessible rentals following a house fire roughly seven years ago that left nine people unhoused. After receiving a call about the emergency at 5 a.m., Trausch and representatives from other local nonprofits jumped into action.

They scrambled to get everyone into shelter. After that, they set out to find them long-term housing. But for one of the residents, a man without legs, locating a permanent dwelling proved exceedingly difficult.

"We couldn't find any place in Chico with ADA-compliant facilities," said Trausch, one of CHAT's founders.

With no other choice, CHAT ended up placing him at one of its houses, but the accommodations weren't ideal. Trausch recalled how the man struggled to enter and exit the bathroom, for example.

"It just wasn't right," he said, "So we started a process of, "OK, how can we fix this?"

Thus began the earliest discussions of CHAT's desire to build its own accessible housing facility, conversations that grew over the years to include local builders, engineers and others in the development community.

Today, after much planning and hard work, including securing a \$16.5 million state grant and fundraising for the grant's required match—an ongoing effort—CHAT is on the verge of starting construction on a fully accessible apartment complex in unincorporated west Chico on a donated 5-acre parcel. Once built, it will be home to aged and



Executive Director's note

disabled people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness.

The community is in tremendous need of the project.

“All these years after the fire, we have the same issue at CHAT. We have people who are facing challenges with mobility, and the houses that are available in the city of Chico are mostly older and aren't equipped to be accessible,” said Sarah Graham, CHAT director of finance and development.

“And for us to make adjustments to those houses, it's difficult and costly and they're not all owned by CHAT, so there are restrictions on what we can do to modify them.”

Graham described the plans for the apartment complex and how they've evolved. The current iteration includes 61 units consisting of 50 studios, five one-bedrooms, and six two-bedrooms, the latter of which will accommodate people who require live-in caregivers.

The facility will be life-changing for so many, she said.

CHAT co-founder Leslie Johnson concurred. She noted that one of CHAT's other founders, the late Dan Everhart—for whom Everhart Village is named—was a paraplegic veteran who had been homeless for a time.

“He really helped us keep people with disabilities in the forefront of our minds,” Johnson said.

She and Trausch routinely see disabled individuals living on Chico's streets. “There are people with a whole range of disabilities, but some are quite extreme and they're still living outside,” she said.

“Or living in facilities that aren't adequate for them,” Trausch added.

One of the final steps before breaking ground on the project is raising the remainder of the matching funds required by the aforementioned grant, along with \$400,000 for project expenses. To accomplish both, CHAT has launched its \$600k by New Year's Day fundraiser. Johnson said the community's help is greatly needed for this final financial hurdle.

“This project is nearing reality and your support can make a difference,” she said.

There was once a period of time when the idea of solving homelessness in our community seemed impossible to me. I knew it was a huge problem, but, like others, I got hung up on the “What can you actually do about it?”

So, you can imagine my excitement when I was given the opportunity to be a part of the solution, first as a CHAT volunteer and board member, and now as executive director.

As Chico's largest nonprofit provider of low-barrier, permanent housing with supportive services, CHAT has a big role to play in reducing the number of people living on the streets. The 2023 homeless census tallied 925 individuals as being unhoused in Chico. This is almost 1 percent of the population.

CHAT is now housing over 200 individuals and preparing to build 61 fully accessible units thanks to a \$16.5 million state grant. It is the largest project in our history, and we are in the midst of an important fundraising effort (see story on page 1).

This is a critical time for CHAT. We are making a huge impact in the lives of others—and helping to improve life in Chico—but we can’t do it alone. A sustainable solution requires community participation, and we invite you to join our efforts.

Thankfully, I see the pieces coming together. Nonprofits are realizing that success means working collaboratively, not in competition. Political leaders are empowering organizations such as ours to build navigation centers, shelters, and low-barrier housing options. The building community is finding creative housing solutions, and business owners and citizens are putting their hard-earned money into the cause.

It’s inspiring to see so many people from so many different walks of life come together. To me, this is what community is all about, and I am left with nothing but gratitude to be a part of it.

-Lizzy Young



When volunteer Janet Brown was recognized earlier this year as CHAT’s inaugural Super Supporter, she demurred. “There are so many people working so hard just out of the passion and commitment to CHAT’s success,” she said.

That may be true, but Brown’s skills are particularly unique, stemming from her many years as a caregiver. Her efforts in that capacity were spent at Enloe Medical Center, where she was a surgical nurse, and in the classroom at Chico State, where she nurtured the minds of students on that career path.

After retiring 15 years ago, Brown began a new journey, one of volunteerism with various nonprofits. In 2017, she read about CHAT in the newspaper and contacted the then all-volunteer organization.

She immediately knew CHAT was a great fit, and started meeting weekly with certain residents, assisting them in a variety of ways, from helping them do laundry and get groceries to simply offering a sympathetic ear. Her professional expertise was especially helpful to those with medical issues. Indeed, it became invaluable.

When COVID erupted in 2020, for example, she helped craft policies designed to keep volunteers, staff and residents healthy.

Brown felt honored to be asked to join CHAT’s Advisory Council, something that gave her even greater insight into the organization. That invitation was extended by CHAT co-founder Leslie Johnson, who listed many reasons Brown is a “Super Supporter.”

“I can only wish CHAT had lots more supporters like Janet,” Johnson said. “She gives generously in every way—she is a donor, a worker bee, a great person to have on any committee, and great at spreading the word about CHAT in our community.”

After years of bearing witness to CHAT’s successes, Brown has become a cheerleader of sorts. She gives presentations to local groups and asks their members to help expand affordable housing through donations, a way she herself supports the organization.

Helping those who are struggling comes as second nature to Brown, and to those looking to give back to the community, she highly recommends volunteering for CHAT.

“I have always deeply cared for those who have little or nothing,” she said. “And with CHAT I feel like the benefits that occur from our efforts are so clear and vivid and real.” -MD



Finding community at Everhart Village

A year ago, Donna was living in a tent at a rat-infested encampment, struggling with medical and mental health issues. She ended up there quite suddenly, after losing her job as a live-in caregiver.

At the encampment, Donna spiraled into a state of anxiety and depression. She felt trapped.

On the one hand, she knew she needed professional help for her physical and mental well-being. On the other, she feared that her belongings would be stolen if she left her campsite. That included two little dogs she couldn't simply leave unattended (see pictured above).

"They were the only things that really kept me going," she said of her beloved Chihuahua mixes.

Thankfully, Donna connected with Butte County Behavioral Health, and, ultimately, became one of the first people to move into Everhart Village, a 20-cabin temporary shelter designed specifically to reach those with mental health diagnoses.

CHAT opened the facility in partnership with Behavioral Health back in February. Today, the village is operating at capacity, helping some of

Chico's most vulnerable citizens, many of whom had not been able to access help elsewhere and had spent years on the streets.

The program is unique, as the village is located adjacent to Behavioral Health, giving clients easy access to critical services, such as those for mental health, substance-use disorder, and primary care. It works, as is evidenced by Donna, the first person to move out of the village and into permanent housing. (In July, she moved into CHAT housing.)

"It is truly a testament to the thought behind this model—that being centrally located right next to crisis resources and Behavioral Health treatment teams is reaching a population of underserved individuals," said Everhart Village Program Director Caitlyn Patterson, noting that support from the public made it a reality.

"We are seeing the efforts of the community come to fruition, and it's really special to watch the healing process for these individuals," she said.

Behavioral Health teams conduct daily outreach to provide the villagers with clinical support. On any given day, they may interact with nurses, psychiatrists, therapists, peer specialists, and case managers.

Meanwhile, CHAT runs the site, making sure the villagers have safe and adequate lodging, as well as food, enrichment programs, and skill-building workshops. CHAT also provides intensive case management, creates individualized goal plans, and helps everyone work toward moving into permanent housing, in addition to coordinating care with their Behavioral Health treatment teams.

Another key component is CHAT's caring volunteers, who provide hearty meals to everyone in the program.

While each person's healing journey varies, Patterson said that "finding community" generally is integral to the process. To that end, the village's communal space—the Community Building, a manufactured home with a kitchen, living room and restrooms—has become the go-to gathering place.

"Human connection is one of the key aspects of finding that stability, and I think this building is going to help provide that," she said.

Village Assistant Mia Harris also underscored the importance of the space. She was hired in January, just before the village opened, and said how rewarding it has been to watch people transform their lives.

"It's just been amazing seeing how this village has been beneficial to everyone," Harris said. -MD

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