

Community Engagement Strategies for Community Service Infrastructure Grant Projects

Grant Round 2 (Ellen's House) & Grant Round 1 (Diversionary Housing Project)

Background on Projects

Ellen's House

Ellen's House was designed by the Community Corrections Partnership (CCP) to provide additional housing and expand access to mental health and substance use disorder treatment services to individuals with a mental health and/or substance use condition at risk for homelessness and involved in the criminal justice system.

To support this effort, Health & Human Services Agency applied for and was awarded a \$1.6 million Round 2 Community Services Infrastructure Grant from the California Health Facilities Financing Authority to purchase a property within Yolo County to help meet the additional need for 24/7 residential substance use/co-occurring treatment.

Ellen's House will provide services for at least eight individuals concurrently and approximately 80 individuals annually. It is dedicated to justice-involved individuals suffering from substance use disorders, experiencing homelessness and who may have co-occurring mental health disorders.

Eligibility for participation in Ellen's House will be determined based on evidence-based screenings and assessments conducted by Health & Human Services Agency and contracted staff trained in these screenings and assessments. Ellen's House will be a licensed residential substance use treatment program with onsite staff 24/7 and robust treatment services which include but are not limited to: group and individual counseling, connection to mental health care, physical health care, housing resources, employment resources and case management to ensure any identified needs of the clients are supported while in treatment, which includes a warm hand-off to the next treatment opportunity upon completion at Ellen's House.

Diversionary Housing Project

The Diversionary Housing Project (DHP) was also designed by the CCP to provide additional housing and expand access to mental health and substance use disorder treatment services to individuals with a mental health and/or substance use condition at risk for homelessness and involved in the criminal justice system.

To support this effort, the CCP applied for and was also awarded a \$1 million Round 1 Community Services Infrastructure Grant to purchase a house in West Sacramento and another in Woodland to each shelter and serve up to five clients at a time, and approximately 20 annually, who have voluntarily committed to the next steps on their road to recovery and rehabilitation. These communities were identified as having the greatest need for diversionary treatment housing based on surveys of both clients and providers.

Eligibility for participation in the DHP will be determined by the Probation Department and Health & Human Services Agency who will be providing supervision and treatment services to participants respectively. DHP clients will already be participants in Mental Health or Addiction Intervention specialty courts. Both men and women are eligible to participate in the program. Sex offenders, however, are not eligible.

The DHP houses will be operated similarly to the IGT House in Woodland which has successfully been in operation for almost four years. Clients are required to follow house rules which include prohibition of guests unless they are reuniting with family members; zero tolerance of substance abuse; a curfew; maintenance of the household and yard; participation in treatment and programming; and full-time employment or actively working toward employment. Violators of house rules are immediately removed from the house.

Note: while the County has obtained funding for these projects and will drive the determinations concerning occupancy, the County standardly utilizes the Housing Authority (Yolo County Housing) or its ancillary non-profit, New Hope Community Development Corporation, to hold ownership and oversee maintenance of the properties. Yolo County Housing also serves as a community outreach partner.

Required Community Outreach

Per California Health Facilities Financing Authority regulations, community outreach and engagement efforts are required in the vicinity of the planned Project site, which include:

- notice informing the public of the time and place of the meeting at which the planned Project will be discussed
- agenda for the meeting which includes time allocated for public discussion; and
- other evidence of collaboration with the county agency that oversees community outreach efforts

Due to COVID and the challenges of holding in-person meetings, prior community outreach efforts for the Diversionary Housing Project included a hand-delivered letter from Yolo County Housing to the neighborhoods of identified properties informing them of the Project and providing a contact to direct their questions and concerns. For the property in West Sacramento, which was already owned by the County, a neighborhood Open House was held. For the property in Woodland, neighbors were provided an information sheet on the Project, encouraged to reach out to Yolo County Housing with their questions and concerns and were notified of when the Board of Supervisors would consider purchase of the property. Additionally, legally required public Notice of Intent to Purchase Property (in the case of the Woodland house) was published seven times in the local newspaper. More detail on past outreach efforts is provided below.

Outreach Challenges

- There continue to be ongoing constraints related to COVID-19 which limit direct contact with interested parties, stakeholders, and impacted neighbors.
- There is a limited timeframe to reach impacted neighbors which cannot occur until a property is identified, and an offer made and accepted. After that, the outreach must occur within the 30-45 day property closing period. Note: when previously searching for properties, there were few available that checked all the boxes and they went quickly given the housing market. As a result, one of the few properties deemed suitable for the Project was lost due to the request for a 45-day closing period which was necessary to accommodate the Board's meeting schedule as property purchase decisions must be made in a public meeting by the Board of Supervisors.
- To date, the Probation Department has carried the load of implementing the Diversionary Housing Project. When help was needed in connecting with neighbors, there was limited staff with knowledge of the Project available to participate in outreach efforts, especially during the short closing period which cannot be pre-scheduled. To accomplish the proposed expansion of outreach efforts, support from CCP departments, the County Administrator's office and possibly Board offices will be needed.

Past Outreach Efforts

As noted above, operation of the Diversionary Housing Project properties is planned to be similar to the IGT House. Likewise, it was the plan to conduct community engagement in the same manner in which it was conducted during implementation of the IGT House. For that project, the community engagement effort mostly consisted of a neighborhood meeting post-property acquisition.

However, during prior efforts, the following were engaged to varying degrees and success at different points before, during and after property acquisition efforts:

- Board of Supervisors – collectively and individually for the members representing the communities of Woodland and West Sacramento
- Supervisor's Deputies representing the communities
- City managers representing the communities
- Woodland City Council member representing the district
- Police Chiefs serving the communities

Engagement of these parties included: briefings on the Diversionary Housing Project when it was developed and during various milestones (i.e., grant award); refreshers and opportunities to provide input once property acquisition efforts commenced; invitation to tour the properties and ask questions once an offer was made; and opportunity to provide input on community outreach efforts.

Beyond outreach to these community leaders, neighbors up and down the street of the properties intended for use in the DHP, and on the streets behind and in front (40 properties in West Sacramento and 60 in Woodland), were hand-delivered information about the Project and property acquisition.

This information also included a contact for neighbors to ask questions and a contact for Spanish speakers. The information was hand-delivered so conversation could be had with neighbors. While a number of neighbors were at home and appreciated the effort, the staff necessary for hand-delivery that was available and knowledgeable about the Project was difficult to coordinate in the short timeframe. Additionally, neighbors needed time to process the information, thus limiting the scope of the conversation.

Current Status of the Diversionary Housing Project

During the process of acquiring Board approval to purchase a property in Woodland for the Diversionary Housing Project, the Board indicated a desire for a more robust community outreach effort prior to property acquisition. The sellers agreed to extend the closing period another 30 days and efforts were made to inform the neighborhood of the Project, answer questions and allay concerns as described above. Ultimately, while the Board still supported the Project, they felt public engagement efforts had been insufficient and did not proceed with property acquisition.

The Diversionary Housing Project has since been paused to research and design a community engagement plan that might meet the needs of impacted neighborhoods and community leaders. During this time, some members of the Board of Supervisors were consulted which resulted in the following recommendations:

1. Research community outreach best practices utilized by other agencies that have landed successful projects
2. Engage community and religious leaders
3. Utilize a citizens committee
4. Develop a communications plan

Proposed Expansion of Outreach

The following outreach strategies are proposed in response to the above recommendations. They also are based on additional research into public engagement practices, including review of the County's Public Engagement Policy. The below have been identified as tools to accomplish the goals of more broadly informing the community about both Ellen's House and the Diversionary Housing Project; seeking input on outreach and ideally, garnering general support for these much-needed services.

The below also includes direct neighborhood engagement strategies, which are limited by short property closing timeframes as well as the availability of staff well-versed in the Projects. Given the added short timeframe remaining to implement Ellen's House, the ability to utilize all the strategies listed below is further limited. That project, however, may not require the use of all strategies given its location.

- 1. Research community outreach best practices utilized by other agencies that have landed successful projects**

- A. The California Health Facilities Financing Authority was consulted on successful outreach efforts with other projects they have funded. They provided the following:

Every County has approached and completed their community outreach differently. I will be honest that most of my current projects are on County owned land, which is much different than trying to find a property. Also, because each County will have a different project and a unique community need the community outreach for each will look different. Most of the community outreach that I have seen are public meetings/open forums with public stakeholders or local agencies in the area that the proposed project will be. This normally takes place prior to the purchase of the property, like what was discussed at the board. Although this has been successfully used with other Counties, I cannot guarantee that it will work for every project/County.

- B. Another agency that may be able to provide some best practices is the Board of State & Community Corrections.
- C. A search of websites did not find a Public Engagement Policy for the cities of West Sacramento, or Woodland, but further inquiry may be fruitful to ensure our efforts align with their interest.
- D. The County's Public Engagement Policy was reviewed as well as the Institute for Local Government's related resources.

2. Engage community and religious leaders

- A. The same community leaders engaged in past outreach efforts as described above would again be contacted, along with their Public Information Officers. They would be reacquainted with the Diversionary Housing Project and their input sought on community outreach prior to resuming property acquisition efforts. Ideally, this would be done collectively in each community for a robust conversation. Once properties are identified, these community leaders would be invited to tour the property with a clear understanding of the tight timeframe. Finally, community leaders would be invited to participate in a neighborhood meeting once properties are identified. Similar outreach as appropriate, would be applied to Ellen's House.
- B. Interfaith organizations and community-based organizations with a vested interest in the population to be served by the Projects could be engaged now. An initial search of such organizations, some of which have already been consulted, includes the following:
- Yolo County Foodbank who has held interfaith events
 - NAMI – National Alliance on Mental Illness
 - Yolo County Homeless and Poverty Action Coalition
 - Mercy Coalition of West Sacramento (interfaith collaborative addressing homelessness and poverty)
 - RISE, Inc.
 - Yolo County Substance Use Continuum

- C. Once an offer is made on a property, faith-based leaders in proximity to the house could be notified via mail, phone and/or in-person to inform them of the effort so they are able to speak with knowledge on the Project in their community should their congregants have questions and concerns. Faith-based leaders would also be invited to tour the property and participate in a neighborhood meeting.

3. Utilize a citizens committee

- A. Members of the Community Corrections Partnership (CCP) engage with the following bodies which could be informed now of the Project and provided opportunity to ask questions and provide input on public engagement:
- Community Corrections Partnership
 - Community Review Board members
 - Health Council
 - Juvenile Justice Commission
 - Juvenile Justice Coordinating Council
 - Local Mental Health Board
 - Restorative Justice Partnership (formerly Neighborhood Court)
 - Yolo County Opioid Coalition

Not only could these bodies be informed about the Project via a mailing or presentation in an upcoming meeting, information about the effort could also be sent to their listservs.

4. Develop a neighborhood communications plan

Besides implementing the above and employing past practices, additional strategies to reach impacted neighbors include:

- A. Direct mailing to neighbors in a 2-block radius of the identified properties in residential neighborhoods and a 0.5 to 1 mile radius for projects in rural areas.
- B. An ADA-compliant website with a portal to submit questions and concerns which could quickly be updated as FAQs accumulate. This website could also be used to inform the community about Project implementation after property acquisition. The website would include language translations.
- C. For the West Sacramento community, if possible, a contact for Russian speakers. If not possible, the website would have a Russian translation.
- D. The legal Notice of Intent to Purchase the Property should include the URL for the Project website.
- E. A neighborhood meeting should be scheduled as soon as possible after an offer on a property is made so that members of the CCP or staff involved in the Project are on hand to answer questions. It would be beneficial to have the neighborhood meeting facilitated by a neutral

party with clear ground rules. Given the short timeframe and ongoing issues related to COVID-19, a virtual meeting would be appropriate.

- F. Besides posting FAQs on the website as described above, posting more information about the success of the IGT House would be beneficial, including testimonials from clients and neighbors.
- G. In the process of hand-delivering information about the Diversionary Housing Project in the past, some neighbors were identified as being in support of the Project. Their testimonials, along with any other parties in support (i.e., citizens committees) could be sought and shared via the website.
- H. Further refinement of the information that is mailed to neighbors.

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