

2025 CSAC CHALLENGE AWARDS - EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Santa Barbara County Encampment Resolution Effort: Restoring the Santa Maria Riverbed

Overview: Santa Barbara County's effort to resolve large numerous established homeless encampments stretching for miles along North County communities required intensive planning efforts involving multiple jurisdictions, including San Luis Obispo County and the City of Santa Maria. The campaign to resolve the encampments, rooted in a housing first philosophy, incorporated the proper mix of public safety, environmental restoration and, above all, humanity.

Challenge: The Santa Maria Riverbed and its parallel Levee Trail has served communities in Northern Santa Barbara County and Southern San Luis Obispo (SLO) County as a place for outdoor recreation, exercise and gatherings for decades. However, with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and the sudden rise in homelessness, the Santa Maria Riverbed's flat and barren terrain, close proximity to commerce, confusing multi-jurisdictional location, and cool-dry climate, provided fertile ground for the growth of extensive homeless encampments. These encampments eventually combined to manifest as an established and at times lawless community resulting in an unsanitary, highly polluted sector of land that once served as a pristine and serene recreational environment. A further complication was the fact that, while the presence of these encampments most directly impacted residential communities within Santa Barbara County and the City of Santa Maria, the jurisdictional authority for nearly the entire Santa Maria Riverbed rested with neighboring SLO county.

Solution: To address this and other encampments throughout the County, Santa Barbara County applied for, and was awarded, approximately \$6 million in California Encampment Resolution Fund, Round-2 (CERF-2) monies to address encampments in waterways across the entire County jurisdiction. Because the parcels of the Santa Maria Riverbed where the homeless encampments existed were entirely within the jurisdiction of another county and principally affected neighborhoods in the City of Santa Maria, any operation designed to address the large and

well-established series of homeless encampments required careful planning and coordination among multiple departments from all three jurisdictions.

Innovation: This project combined the homelessness expertise, funding, planning and leadership capabilities of the County of Santa Barbara's Community Services Department with the law enforcement, outreach, public health, public defender, behavioral wellness, and animal services resources from both counties and the city along with numerous non-profit organizations from all jurisdictions. Over eight months of bi-weekly planning sessions involving leadership from all levels from multiple departments across three jurisdictions resulted in an unprecedented level of communication, shared understanding, determination, and capability to address this issue which reassured everyone that a humane solution to a seemingly insurmountable and nasty community problem was finally going to be implemented.

Results: Following this unprecedented level of coordination and collaboration across multiple jurisdictions, from July through November 2024, Santa Barbara County launched and led a coordinated effort involving all jurisdictions linking over 100 unhoused individuals with case management and housing support from government and non-profit providers. Additionally, over 150 tons of debris, including hazardous materials, were removed from the riverbed while government and non-profit animal services providers treated and rescued dozens of animals. The product of this carefully coordinated campaign enabled many formerly homeless individuals to be relocated from unsafe and unsanitary condition into housing, or reunited with families. Additionally, the riverbed was restored to, and remains in, near pristine condition to this day.

Replicability: Santa Barbara County's approach to this challenge serves as a valuable model for other jurisdictions. Parochialism was overcome with open communication, trust, shared understanding and community service for the benefit of those suffering in the encampments, those living in fear throughout the nearby communities, and the natural settings of the Santa Maria Riverbed.

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