



Community Toolkit on Homelessness

Homelessness is an extremely complex social problem that impacts the quality of life in our community. There are no easy solutions. Homeless people are members of our community and should be extended the same level of consideration as those who are housed. However, every private citizen, business and property owner deserves to live their lives free of the negative impacts of those living unhoused.

Homelessness is a significant barrier to success for many in Tuolumne County. Homelessness is a community problem and solutions to homelessness will come from the community. Many people in Tuolumne County have a desire to help—the list below is intended to support those who want to make a difference.

➤ **UNDERSTAND THAT THERE ARE MANY PATHS TO HOMELESSNESS AND THAT NOT EVERYONE EXPERIENCING HOMELESSNESS IS ADDICTED TO DRUGS AND ALCOHOL.**

Substance abuse can be both a cause and a result of homelessness, but a common stereotype of the homeless population is that they are all alcoholics or drug abusers. Substance abuse often arises after people lose their housing. And losing housing can come in a variety of ways.

- A costly car repair can lead someone to unemployment and ultimately eviction.
- A divorce can lead someone to being unsheltered.
- A medical emergency and lack of familial support can lead someone to homelessness.
- An unpaid utility bill can break a lease agreement and be a boot to the streets.

Most people will never know what it is like to try to survive without housing. Homeless persons and the people who assist them list the following as just some of the realities:

The constant search for temporary shelter

- Inadequate food & nutrition
- Shortage of appropriate clothing
- Sexual victimization
- Harassment and physical assault
- Inadequate medical services
- Negative self-esteem
- Social isolation
- Development of mental health and/or substance abuse problems
- Poor prospects for employment and appropriate permanent housing
- Harassment

➤ **GET CONNECTED WITH COMMUNITY SERVICE PROVIDERS AND FIGURE OUT HOW YOU CAN VOLUNTEER, DONATE GOODS, OR GIVE FINANCIAL SUPPORT.**

Who knows the facts, figures and people experiencing homelessness better than the organizations who are already serving the homeless community? There may be “behind the scenes” information that you are not aware of. Which aspect of homelessness speaks to you the most? Align yourself with an organization who tackles that specifically and be a part of a long-term change. Partner with organizations whose sole mission is to provide support services aimed at making homelessness rare, brief, and non-recurring.

Some of these agencies in Tuolumne County are:

- Amador Tuolumne Community Action Agency—<https://www.atcaa.org/>
- Center For A Non Violent Community—<https://nonviolentcommunity.org/>
- Central Sierra Continuum of Care—<https://www.centralsierracoc.org/>
- Give Someone a Chance—<https://www.givesomeoneachancetc.org/>
- Habitat for Humanity—<http://www.habitattuolumne.org/>
- Interfaith Community Social Services—<https://interfaithsonora.com/>
- Lighthouse Ministries—<http://newlifelighthouse.org/>
- Mother Lode Job Training—<https://www.mljt.org/>
- Nancy’s Hope—<https://www.nancyshope.org/>
- Refuge Recovery—<https://www.therefugeca.com>
- Resiliency Village—<https://resiliencyvillage.org/>
- Tuolumne County Health & Human Services Agency—<https://www.tuolumnecounty.ca.gov/219/Health-Human-Services>

➤ **DON’T AVOID EYE-CONTACT WHEN YOU ENCOUNTER A PERSON EXPERIENCING HOMELESSNESS BUT RATHER, SAY HELLO AND IF APPROPRIATE, INTRODUCE YOURSELF AND ENTER INTO CONVERSATION.**

Often, homelessness leads a person to experience chronic isolation. The long-term absence of social contact and loneliness morphs into a type of toxic stress which only leads to increased risk for unhealthy outlets. Most people experiencing homelessness are seen as “invisible” and avoided by the public. This type of social response takes a toll on mental health. No one deserves to be treated as if they are invisible. When appropriate, and possible, build relationship and rapport—just this little interaction will help them to feel “visible”. With so many individuals having a lack of community, or healthy community at that, your sincerity is invaluable.

➤ **DON’T EXPECT SOMEONE ELSE TO DO WHAT YOU CAN DO.**

We often assume that somebody will take action but more times than not, nobody does, so nothing gets done. Use your resources and privileges to strengthen your community by being solution driven. It’s important to look at what part you can play in ending homelessness.

- If you are a landlord, can you have forgiveness for eviction history and help someone secure housing?
- If you are a business owner, can you provide an opportunity for financial gain that can help someone out of homelessness?
- If you are a banker, can you offer forgiveness accounts so someone with poor credit history can open a bank account?

- If you are a community member, can you learn about your community and resources to help be an agent of change?

It takes a community to help the community.

➤ **REFER YOUR HOMELESS NEIGHBORS TO TUOLUMNE COUNTY HEALTH & HUMAN SERVICES AGENCY.**

Tuolumne County Health & Human Services Agency has Integrated Case Workers who will help those who are homeless or vulnerable to homelessness to determine if they are eligible for public assistance benefits in the areas of Social Services, Behavioral Health, and Public Health. Health & Human Services will also provide support in connecting people to employment and related services. The Community Roots resource hotline can be reached at 209.533.5711.

➤ **INVOLVE LAW ENFORCEMENT WHEN NECESSARY.**

If you witness a dangerous situation or are in danger personally, call 911. If you need to contact law enforcement for something that is not an emergency call Sonora Police Department (209.532.8143) for needs inside city limits or Tuolumne County Sheriff (209.533.5815) for needs outside city limits.

➤ **GET INFORMED.**

Housing & homelessness is complicated, and solutions are not easy. There are many resourcing agencies who have informative online content. Spend some time reading, watching, discussing, and considering how you can be an agent for social change. Start by connecting to some of the websites below.

- Hunger & Homelessness Awareness Week <https://hhweek.org/>
- Invisible People <https://invisiblepeople.tv/>
- National Association to End Homelessness— <https://endhomelessness.org/>
- National Coalition for the Homeless <https://nationalhomeless.org/>
- Urban Institute <https://www.urban.org/>
- Tuolumne County Homeless Services Virtual Bulletin Board <https://www.tuolumnecounty.ca.gov/1505/Homeless-Services-Virtual-Bulletin-Board>
- Tuolumne County Homeless Services Data Dashboard <https://www.tuolumnecounty.ca.gov/1505/Homeless-Services-Virtual-Bulletin-Board>

➤ **FOR BUSINESS & PROPERTY OWNERS.**

If someone is being disruptive, deescalate the situation, if you are comfortable doing so. Politely ask unwanted persons to leave. Identify your personal boundaries and call the Sheriff to report illegal activity. If anyone is interfering with your ability to do business and will not leave, call the non-emergency number of the Sheriff Department to request assistance. If someone is threatening harm to themselves or others, acting violent or reckless, or appearing to be experiencing a crisis, ask them to leave clearly and politely and call 911.

Consider installing motion-sensitive security lights. Set up “no trespassing” and “no overnight camping” signs in line with county ordinance. Lock or turn off exterior power outlets. Install security cameras and signs indicating the area is under surveillance. Keep trash bins, storage areas, and gates locked. Immediately report unwanted occupation of privately-owned areas under your control. Keep the business areas clean to encourage others to respect the space. Report all suspicious activity to the Sheriff as it is occurring, regardless of whether it directly impacts your business, or not.

➤ WHAT TO AVOID.

Avoid offering food, goods, or money as it may encourage repeat requests, panhandling, and could potentially contribute to unhealthy lifestyles. There are local professional organizations that specialize in the charitable distribution of goods. Instead, offer a card or connection to local professional organizations to best help them. Do not allow anyone to camp or store belongings on your property for any amount of time because agreeing to this activity could establish certain rights and make evicting unwanted guests problematic.

➤ LAWS AND HOMELESSNESS.

• IS IT ILLEGAL TO LOITER?

State law prohibits loitering, prowling, or wandering upon private property, at any time, without visible or lawful business with the owner or occupant. For purposes of this law, “loiter” means “to delay or linger without a lawful purpose for being on the property and for the purpose of committing a crime as opportunity may be discovered.” (Cal. Pen. Code §647(h))

• WHAT DO I DO IF SOMEONE IS TRESPASSING ON MY PROPERTY?

Generally speaking, a trespass involves more than a person’s unauthorized entry onto the property of another. Under California criminal law, trespass also requires a specific intent to interfere with or damage the owner’s property or right to property; and interference with or actual damage to the property occurs. The most common ways that California’s criminal trespass laws are violated are the following: (1) entering onto another’s property to interfere with business; (2) entering onto another’s property with the intent to damage the property; (3) unlawfully occupying the property of another; (4) refusing to leave the property of another upon the owner’s request; or (5) refusing to leave a public building during the hours in which the building is regularly closed, after being asked to leave by a person employed there. (Cal. Pen. Code §602) There are two commonly recognized ways to protect yourself from trespass, by enclosing your property with a fence, or by posting “no trespassing” signs at regular intervals (3 per mile, along all exterior boundaries and at all roads and pathways entering the land). Additionally, law enforcement agencies often request a “Letter of Agency” or “Trespass Letter” from property owners. This letter allows them to act as the agent for the private property owner for the purpose of enforcing laws against a person found on the property without the owner’s consent or without lawful purpose. Contact your local law enforcement agency to ask about a Letter of Agency or Trespass Letter form.

If you see someone trespassing on your property, contact the Sheriff’s office immediately, but keep in mind that the Sheriff’s office may not be able to assist if the trespass elements mentioned above have not been met.

• WHAT DO I DO IF SOMEONE IS CAMPING ON MY PROPERTY?

Camping without the property owner’s permission can be considered a trespass, if the person enters and remains on your private property and refuses to leave upon your request. See above for information regarding trespass. What do I do with personal possessions that someone leaves behind on my property?

A private property owner does not generally owe a duty to maintain or safekeep personal property left by a trespasser. However, if you, as the private property owner, have allowed the person to live or remain on the property, you could be considered a “landlord,” in which case you must follow very specific steps before disposing of property that has been abandoned, including: (1) inventorying and storing the property in a safe location; (2) giving the tenant notice of the abandoned property and your intention to dispose of it if they do not claim the property. For more information about what is required for a tenant’s abandoned property, see Cal.

Code of Civil Proc. §§1983-1986. If a trespasser has left unwanted possessions on your property, it is your duty as the property owner to dispose of those items.

- **IS IT AGAINST THE LAW TO CAMP ON PUBLIC PROPERTY?**

Cities and Counties can adopt laws to restrict or prohibit camping on public property. Even with laws in place, however, enforcement of those No Camping laws is difficult due to recent case law, where courts have held that ordinances prohibiting camping and sleeping on public property are unconstitutional when there are a greater number of homeless individuals in a jurisdiction than the number of available shelter beds. The government cannot criminalize indigent, homeless people for sleeping outdoors on public property if there is no option of sleeping indoors. However, ordinances prohibiting camping during hours or in particular places (such as in public rights of way or near critical infrastructure) can be enforced. It is important to note, though, that even when these ordinances are enforced, if there is no shelter to offer the individual, then effectively that person will move to another public area.

- **IS IT LEGAL TO PANHANDLE IN TUOLUMNE COUNTY?**

Technically, no. Panhandling for gratuitous donations is protected under the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution. *Aggressive* panhandling, however, is illegal under California law. The California Penal Code defines aggressive panhandling under its Disorderly Conduct statute as follows: a person “who accosts other persons in any public place or in any place open to the public for the purpose of begging or soliciting alms.” Accosting a person is generally regarded as approaching and/or stopping somebody to speak to that person in an unreasonably insistent, threatening, intimidating or intrusive matter.

Merely requesting and/or receiving gratuitous (free) donations is not a violation of law and cannot form the basis for detention.

- **IS IT ILLEGAL FOR HOMELESS PEOPLE TO LITTER?**

Littering is illegal on public or private property in California. Anyone who violates this law is guilty of an infraction. (Cal. Pen. Code §374.4). Littering is the discarding, dropping or scattering of small quantities of waste matter ordinarily carried on or about the person (e.g., beverage containers, packaging, wrappers, wastepaper, newspapers, magazines) in any place not designated for proper disposal thereof. A littering conviction carries fines of \$250 up to \$3,000 and can include probation time.

- **IS PUBLIC INTOXICATION STILL ILLEGAL? WHAT ABOUT USING ILLEGAL SUBSTANCES?**

In most cases, the possession and use of narcotics, and the consumption of alcohol, in public, are unlawful and should be reported to law enforcement. (Cal. Pen. Code §647(f); Tuolumne County Ordinance Code, Chapter 9.12)

- **DOES TUOLUMNE COUNTY HAVE ANY LAWS OR ORDINANCES RELATED TO HOMELESSNESS?**

At the Board of Supervisors meeting on March 5th, 2024, the Board approved Clean & Clear Homeless Encampment and Critical Infrastructure ordinances. Included in this action was a resolution and a list from the County Administrator’s Office identifying critical infrastructure in Tuolumne County. Follow this link to that meeting and documents:

https://tuolumneco.granicus.com/player/clip/818?view_id=5&meta_id=110017&redirect=true.