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NAVIGATION CENTER GRAND OPENING

MERCED—Less than a year from its groundbreaking, Merced County’s “Navigation Center”, a critical component of our region’s collaborative effort to address homelessness, is scheduled to open later this month.

The 15,000 square-foot facility was constructed from modified shipping containers to save money, cut down on construction time, and provide for a versatile and modern look. Construction was completed mid-March, and the Navigation Center will open for service on Monday, March 29th. The County has contracted with the Merced County Rescue Mission to manage the new facility which will operate 24/7.

“The Rescue Mission considers it a great privilege to operate the Navigation Center as we collaborate with the County and City of Merced to provide services to people experiencing homelessness,” said Bruce Metcalf, Executive Director of the Merced County Rescue Mission.

The Navigation Center will serve as a low-barrier emergency sheltering option for individuals currently residing in public spaces, and other places not suitable for human habitation. This initial step transitioning individuals out of homelessness includes providing a safe and service-rich temporary shelter with connections to onsite supportive services. Clients will be assigned a case manager. The goal is to link Navigation Center clients to permanent supportive and affordable housing units as quickly as possible, while simultaneously working on barriers to sustainability such as lack of income and behavioral health challenges.

District 4 Supervisor Lloyd Pareira, who also serves on the Board of the Merced City and County Continuum of Care (CoC), highlighted the significance of this project as part of the continuum of services to address homelessness.

“The Navigation Center will not only address its participants’ need for a safe space, bed, and meals, it also provides the opportunity to build relationships. Through these relationships, our goal is to engage homeless individuals with the necessary services to prepare and transition them into stable housing,” Pareira said. “This project is the result of many key partners, including Assemblyman Adam Gray, the CoC, the Central California Alliance for Health, the City of Merced, and others.”

“The opening of the Navigation Center is a vital part of our collective efforts to reduce homelessness in Merced County,” said Assemblymember Adam Gray. “It is not a silver bullet, but will go a long way

in improving the quality of life for those experiencing homelessness in our community and all Merced residents. We remain committed to cleaning up our streets and ensuring that we not only provide a bed, but also the services needed to keep people in housing – the Navigation Center will help us accomplish those goals.”

“As the Medi-Cal managed care health plan serving approximately half of all Merced residents, the Alliance recognizes that having a stable home is a key factor in improving overall health outcomes for these individuals,” said Stephanie Sonnenshine, CEO of the Central California Alliance for Health (the Alliance). “We are therefore pleased to support the new Merced Navigation Center as this facility will not only link its clients to secure housing, income, and job training resources, but will also ensure that all participants will be connected to Medi-Cal and a primary care physician. These proactive measures will ultimately reduce their need for more costly emergency medical services and hospitalizations, and more importantly, bring us closer to our shared vision of Healthy People, Healthy Communities.”

The design includes approximately 75 beds, kitchen and dining facilities, laundry, classroom, clinic, and office space for support service providers. Due to COVID-19 safety requirements, the Center will initially open with a 66-bed capacity. The Merced County Rescue Mission has established a Navigation Center Advisory Committee to work with partners, including businesses and organizations in the neighborhood, as a component of its “Good Neighbor Policy” to ensure community involvement and coordination to maximize the program’s positive impact on the surrounding neighborhood.

Serving as one of several emergency shelter options in Merced County, the Navigation Center will provide participants with 24/7 temporary living facilities, in addition to case management and connection to income, public benefits, health services, and transitional or permanent housing. The average anticipated length of stay is six months.

Referrals to the Navigation Center are made in close coordination with homeless outreach workers, local law enforcement, and Navigation Center staff. To make a referral, contact the countywide New Direction Outreach and Engagement Center by calling (209) 726-2700. Once a referral is made, an assigned outreach worker will contact, screen, and refer individuals to the appropriate housing and community services based on a standard assessment tool.

“I am very excited for the County's Navigation Center to open,” said City of Merced Mayor Matthew Serratto, who also serves as Chairman of the Merced City and County Continuum of Care. “The achievement of the last few years has been in planning, funding, and now building this and other projects. Now it's time to get to work and hopefully start making gradual progress on this most challenging issue. We have a lot of tremendous people doing incredible work every day on addressing homelessness, and we will keep fighting to help our community.”

The Navigation Center is one element of the proposed regional plan to address homelessness—a collaborative effort between Merced County, its six cities, and the CoC. Other elements include outreach and engagement, transitional housing, long-term supportive housing, and the system supports needed to coordinate these activities. Earlier this year, the Board of Supervisors renewed an agreement with the Merced County Rescue Mission to provide other communities outside of the City of Merced with access to similar services on an appropriate scale by renting homes distributed across Merced County that will be similarly used as low-barrier Navigation Centers.