



BLUE BAG PARTNERSHIP PILOT EFFORT

**NOVEMBER 20, 2019
COUNTY OF SAN LUIS OBISPO**

Results from the 2019 inter-agency Blue Bag Partnership Pilot Effort to improve sanitation at encampments of unsheltered persons.

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Acronyms and Abbreviations

CASQA	California Stormwater Quality Association
CAT Deputies	Community Action Team (Law Enforcement deputies)
CDFW	California Department of Fish and Wildlife
Caltrans	California Department of Transportation (District 5)
CDC	Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
County	County of San Luis Obispo
HIV	Human Immunodeficiency Virus
PIT Count	Point-in-time count.
SEP	Syringe Exchange Program
WaSH	Water, Sanitation & Hygiene

What is the Blue Bag Partnership?

Background

In early 2019, staff from the City of San Luis Obispo Administrative Office and County of San Luis Obispo (County) Social Services and Department of Public Works (Public Works) attended a webcast hosted by the California Stormwater Quality Association (CASQA) focusing on *Homelessness and the Role of Stormwater Management*. The webcast included case studies from numerous jurisdictions that have worked to remediate trash from encampments of unsheltered people experiencing homelessness.

County staff were particularly interested in the Blue Bag Partnership, a program currently underway in Santa Clara County that is focused on waterways near San Jose. The Blue Bag Partnership distributes uniquely colored, durable waste disposal bags to unsheltered residents of encampments and collects and disposes of bagged waste. The primary purpose of the Blue Bag Partnership is to provide basic sanitation service to areas with significant encampments and attempt to offset the expense of large-scale waste cleanup and disposal during encampment removal. While the Blue Bag Partnership presents a short-term strategy for providing rudimentary sanitation at encampments, it does not fully offset the expenses associated with comprehensive cleanup and remediation of vacated encampment sites.



Figure 1: Bagged waste at the encampment site prior to the Pilot effort.

County staff became interested in testing the Blue Bag Partnership (Partnership) concept locally, and in exploring ways to potentially improve upon the methods and scope of the Partnership in Santa Clara County. The Partnership primarily involves the City of San Jose and Santa Clara Valley Water District, and does not engage non-profit organizations or social services groups. Following discussions with staff at the Santa Clara Valley Water District, the California Department of Transportation (Caltrans), and local waste management firms, it was determined the County could improve upon the existing model by incorporating non-profit partners and Community Action Team peace officers (CAT deputies) into the effort.

In July 2019, County Public Works requested permission and authorization to use funds from the Waste Management cost center to conduct a limited 4-week Blue Bag Partnership Pilot effort (Pilot effort) to test the concept of the Partnership. The Pilot effort tracked several metrics to gauge the overall impact of the effort, including the weight of waste removed and number of sharps collected for safe disposal.

This report presents a summary of the considerations associated with establishing a Blue Bag Partnership, the outcomes and impact of the 4-week Pilot effort, and partner perspectives on the successes and challenges associated with the concept.

Why is the Blue Bag Partnership Necessary?

Encampments in San Luis Obispo County

The San Luis Obispo County Homeless Point-in-Time Count (PIT Count) enumerates unsheltered homeless individuals and families, such as those sleeping outdoors, on the street, or in parks, tents, or vehicles.

In 2019, the PIT count surveyed approximately 1,172 unsheltered individuals experiencing homelessness across San Luis Obispo County. The unsheltered population reported seeking shelter in a variety of locations, including encampment areas (Figure 2).¹ Encampments can be established in a variety of forms and may be comprised of a solitary shelter occupied by one individual, or a cluster of shelters occupied by several people.

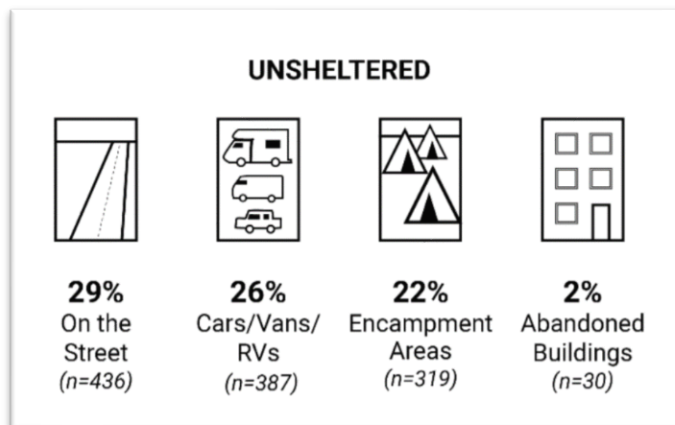


Figure 2: Sleeping accommodations reported by unsheltered individuals, 2019 PIT Count.

Due to a lack of emergency shelter and housing options, many of the unsheltered people experiencing homelessness in San Luis Obispo County do not have the option of sheltering indoors. While concerted effort is being made to expand access to temporary shelter and permanent housing across the County, encampments will continue to be a place of refuge for people experiencing homelessness in the near term.

Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene at Encampments



Figure 3: An encampment within a riparian creek corridor in San Luis Obispo County.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) focuses on three elements of basic sanitation as critical to ensuring health, survival, and development. These elements include access to clean drinking water, facilities for the safe disposal of waste (through services such as garbage collection and wastewater treatment and disposal), and the ability to maintain hygienic conditions.² Collectively, water, sanitation, and hygiene are referred to as WaSH services. Access to reliable WaSH services is globally recognized as the means to reduce illness and death from disease, leading to improved community health, poverty reduction, and socio-economic development.³

People experiencing homelessness are unable to access or establish reliable WaSH services as they lack a physical address required to obtain utility services. Access to WaSH services at shelters and public facilities may be limited by proximity to the encampment, operational hours, and available resources. There are significant costs and challenges associated with providing

comprehensive WaSH services to the semi-remote and temporary locations where encampments are established.

Across San Luis Obispo County, transient encampments are frequently established in the vegetated areas near streams, creeks, and rivers (Figure 3). They are commonly located near the bridge crossings of major roads, but also occur in more remote and secluded areas adjacent to local waterways (Figure 4). These locations are preferable to people experiencing homelessness as the environment of riparian areas provides privacy and a natural shelter from the elements, and the waterway may support rudimentary hygiene.



Figure 4: An encampment established beneath a bridge in San Luis Obispo County.

While providing an adequate and reliable source of clean drinking water to encampments for consumption and hygiene is logistically prohibitive, garbage removal services (supporting sanitation) can be adapted to service semi-remote locations and present an opportunity to improve health outcomes for the encampment and community, and protect water quality in nearby waterways. The Blue Bag Partnership is a strategy that extends garbage removal services to encampments to enhance sanitation.

Why is it Called the Blue Bag Partnership?

The Blue Bag Partnership describes a collaborative, voluntary effort to promote sanitation and waste disposal using distinctive blue colored janitorial supplies (Figure 5). The success of the Blue Bag Partnership trash reduction strategy depends on the willingness of agency and community partners to work together and adjust enforcement procedures and protocols to facilitate and encourage voluntary trash removal. Unsheltered members of the community, law enforcement officers, non-profit partners, and municipal staff must work together in good faith as there are no incentives offered to participants.

Encampment Resident Partners

Engagement of unsheltered community members is a critical element in establishing a potential Partnership. An advocate from Hope's Village SLO made numerous visits and regularly met with the unsheltered occupants of the proposed Pilot site encampment to discuss the project and gauge the willingness to participate. Many of the unsheltered encampment occupants expressed strong enthusiasm to participate and an eagerness to ensure the success of the Pilot effort. Word of the potential Pilot effort circulated through the encampment area for several weeks in advance of the effort, allowing occupants to discuss the opportunity and encourage participation.



Figure 5: Blue bags in use at the Pilot effort encampment site.

Law Enforcement Agency Partners



The Pilot effort involved law enforcement representatives from the Sheriff's Office, City of San Luis Obispo Police Department, and California Department of Fish and Wildlife (CDFW). Sheriff's Office Deputies and CDFW Wardens were familiar with the Pilot encampment and with several of the unsheltered community members residing in the area. The primary goals of involving peace officers in the Pilot effort were to provide security support to volunteers and to encourage unsheltered people to engage with social services. CAT deputies from the Sheriff's Office and City of San Luis Obispo were engaged throughout the Pilot effort. Peace officers did not prioritize issuing citations, checking criminal history, or enforcing municipal codes during the Pilot effort.

Non-Profit Agency Partners



Volunteers from Hope's Village SLO and the SLO Bangers' syringe exchange program were vital to fostering positive and productive interactions throughout the Pilot effort. Early outreach by a Hope's Village volunteer to the encampment was important for estimating the potential participation, the amount of supplies needed, and optimizing timing for roll-off delivery and removal. Trained volunteers from the SLO Bangers participated in each weekly supply distribution, and were an essential non-governmental presence throughout

the effort. The non-profit volunteer partners were invaluable in their ability to promote non-biased, well-informed, and professional interactions between agencies and the unsheltered encampment occupants.



Public Agency Partners

Staff from the County, City of San Luis Obispo, and Caltrans worked closely to coordinate funding and logistical support for the Pilot effort. Preventing an increase in illegal dumping at the site and ensuring safety in the nearby road right-of-way were high priorities for public agencies involved in the effort.



The City and County were the primary funding agencies associated with the effort, and shared coordination of supply distribution visits, waste hauler communication, and monitoring the conditions of the site. Caltrans provided support in monitoring the adjoining right-of-way and removing and reporting any waste bags that were placed for disposal.



Coordinating Resources & Establishing a Partnership

The coordination process began with a series of one-to-one meetings between Public Works and each potential partner agency. These discussions were critical in identifying the goals, resources, and constraints of each partner. As consensus formed, meetings assembled multiple partners to outline roles and capabilities, and to identify potential limitations or problematic outcomes. The capabilities, concerns, and constraints of all partners were duly communicated and considered while establishing the partnership.

Navigating Conflicting Roles as Partners

Most municipal and law enforcement agencies have policies and procedures relating specifically to transient encampments. These policies address a range of topics from code enforcement (noticing) to waste removal and remediation of encampment sites. The Pilot effort coordination process revealed that policies of several participating entities were in direct conflict with each other or the broader intent of the Pilot effort. Each participating agency had to incorporate flexibility into their policies and procedures in order to facilitate the Pilot effort.

There were also significant disparities in communication styles and priorities of partners involved in the Pilot effort. Protecting local waterways and improving community health by reducing the volume of uncontained trash were established as the unifying goals that aligned with the mission and objectives of all partners (Figure 6).

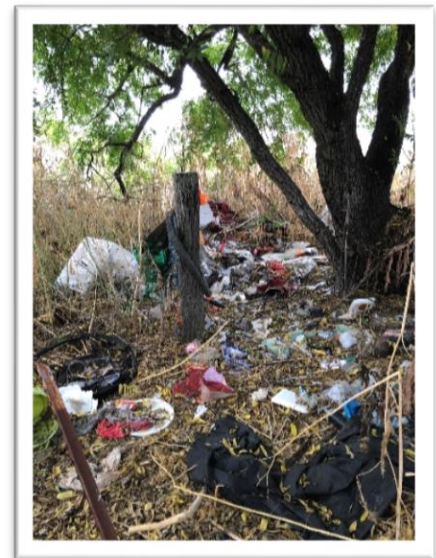


Figure 6: Uncontained trash at an abandoned encampment site.

Does This Concept Work?

The relative success of the Blue Bag Partnership is dependent upon a wide array of factors. This section discusses the considerations that were factored into planning the Pilot effort that should be considered for any future efforts or program expansion.

Selecting an Encampment Site for Partnership

At the time of writing this report, there were approximately 258 known encampment sites located throughout county unincorporated areas (Figure 7).

Several known, long-term encampment sites were evaluated as potential Pilot sites, with consideration given to many characteristics of the encampments. A summary of encampment site conditions and considerations are included in this section.

Who owns the property where the encampment is located?

Property ownership impacts the funding sources available for providing services, as well as the prevailing governing codes and ordinances for the use of the site.

- Public property: owned by a local government or public authority (City/County)
- Private property: owned by an individual or corporation

How is the encampment accessed?

Access routes to encampments vary by location and may utilize varying lengths of paved roads, narrow foot paths, or unpaved access roads. Site accessibility for waste haulers, agency partners, and unsheltered community members should all be considered. Optimal access conditions include:

- Suitable access road(s) for a waste hauler to deliver and remove a roll-off trash container;
- A roll-off placement location near established and frequently traveled foot paths to the encampment and outside road rights-of-way;
- A staging or parking area for agency partners to access the site for supply distribution.

How long has the encampment site been occupied? How many people live there?

Encampments are transient by nature and sites may fluctuate between occupied or abandoned as conditions change unpredictably in the surrounding area. The potential for waste accumulation (and the need for sanitation support) increases over the duration that an area is occupied, and in correlation with the number of unsheltered community members residing at the site. Considerations include:

- The number of people consistently utilizing the encampment area;
- The duration that the site has been consistently or intermittently occupied.

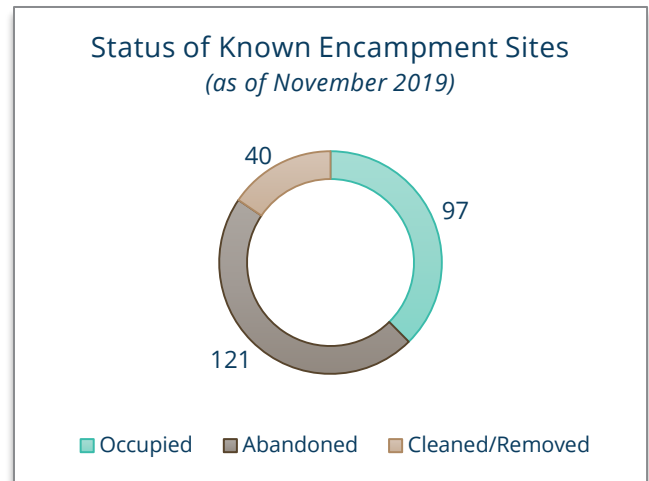


Figure 7: Status of known encampment sites in unincorporated San Luis Obispo County

What is the proximity of the encampment to partnering agencies?

The proximity of an encampment site is an important factor in the cost of maintaining an interagency partnership. Throughout the Pilot effort, partners visited the site up to three times each week to monitor conditions and distribute waste collection resources to unsheltered community members. The distance and transit time to the encampment location factor into the overall costs and level of effort associated with public agency support, waste hauling and disposal.

Virtually all partnering agencies were involved in the process of selecting the encampment site for the Pilot effort. Each of the factors noted in the previous section were meticulously considered and discussed, as they directly correlated to the commitment required from each partnering agency.

Measurable Outcomes and Weekly Metrics

An array of metrics was identified at the outset of the Pilot effort that could be used to measure outcomes. Some of the metrics were ultimately infeasible to track, but others provide important insight into the progress and success of the Blue Bag Partnership.

The metrics considered at the initiation of the Pilot effort included:

- *Number of Blue Bags distributed*
- *Number of Blue Bags collected/disposed*
- *Number of Caltrans orange bags collected/disposed*
- *Number of personal sharps* containers distributed*
- *Number of personal sharps containers collected/disposed*
- *Location of Blue Bag distribution*
- *Location of Blue Bag retrieval/disposal*
- *Number of unsheltered persons participating*
- *Number of sharps collected/disposed*
- *Volume/tonnage of waste removed*

**Sharps may include: syringes and hollow needles used to inject medications or drugs, lancets used to get drops of blood for testing, or autoinjectors such as insulin pens.*



Figure 8: Sample of a marked personal sharps disposal container.

The established Blue Bag Partnership in Santa Clara County does not track any of the metrics listed above and does not include an effort to segregate sharps from the waste stream. While the structure of the program in Santa Clara County requires less agency involvement, the lack of tracking impedes assessing the impact of the effort.

The Pilot effort utilized specially marked bags and sharps containers (Figure 8) to distinguish supplies distributed by the Pilot effort from others already in the field and facilitate tracking of the efforts impact. The approach for the Pilot effort ultimately prevented measurement of the number of participants and number of bags that were used for waste disposal. However, tracking the volume of supplies distributed (bags and sharps containers), number of sharps collected/disposed, and weight/volume of waste removed each week allows for an evaluation of the Pilot effort impact each week and overall.

The 4-Week Pilot Effort Near San Luis Obispo

Following extensive outreach, collaboration, and planning, the 4-week Pilot effort commenced at a creek-side encampment near San Luis Obispo on September 9, 2019. The Pilot site was estimated to have 15-30 occupants, many of whom had been present at the location for 6 months or longer. The Pilot site was located on publicly owned property within 20 minutes drive time from partnering agency headquarters.

Week 1

Week 1 of the Pilot effort included a high level of outreach and monitoring at the site. An intensive schedule of site monitoring was incorporated to facilitate a timely response to any unexpected events. The Week 1 schedule included the tasks outlined in Table 1.

Schedule	Task	Number of Staff
Monday <i>(afternoon)</i>	Distribute bags and sharps containers, alert encampment of roll-off delivery.	2 field teams, 4-5 agency representatives each
Tuesday <i>(morning)</i>	Meet roll-off driver onsite for delivery of container. Install centralized heavy-duty sharps disposal station.	3 agency representatives
Tuesday <i>(afternoon)</i>	Check capacity of roll-off and condition of road right-of-way.	1-2 agency representatives
Wednesday <i>(morning)</i>	Check capacity of roll-off and condition of road right-of-way.	1-2 agency representatives
Wednesday <i>(afternoon)</i>	Check capacity of roll-off and condition of road right-of-way.	1-2 agency representatives
Thursday <i>(morning)</i>	Scheduled roll-off removal.	No agency representatives
Thursday <i>(afternoon)</i>	Distribute bags and sharps containers, alert encampment of roll-off schedule for coming week.	1 field team, 4-5 agency representatives
Friday <i>(afternoon)</i>	Check condition of road right-of-way.	1-2 agency representatives

Table 1: Pilot Effort Week 1 Schedule

Due to a miscommunication between agencies, many encampment occupants were issued a notice to vacate the site three days before the Pilot effort commenced. Issuing notices to vacate public property is an established policy of the City of San Luis Obispo, however, it was uncertain how the noticing would impact the willingness of the encampment occupants to participate in the Pilot effort. City staff agreed to delay enforcing the notices while the Pilot effort was underway.

During the Monday supply distribution, encampment occupants were provided with marked blue waste bags and notified that a roll-off would be present for trash disposal from Tuesday to Thursday.

SLO Bangers volunteers provided personal sharps disposal containers and notified recipients that containers could be returned for disposal during their Wednesday night operating hours, or during the following week’s Monday supply distribution. Encampment occupants were also notified that a secure, durable, sharps disposal box would be installed near the site (Figure 9). During the Week 1 supply distribution SLO Bangers volunteers assisted encampment residents with removing 25 uncontained sharps from the field.

The need to adapt to unexpected outcomes was apparent by Tuesday afternoon, when a site monitoring visit revealed the roll-off was already filled (Figure 10).

Agency representatives quickly coordinated removal and delivery of a new empty roll-off on Wednesday morning, and organized additional outreach to notify the encampment.



Figure 10: Centralized, secure sharps disposal box installed onsite.



Figure 9: 20cy roll-off, filled within 6 hours of delivery to the site.

Within the first 24 hours of access to a roll-off container, approximately 1.56 tons of accumulated trash was removed from the encampment for disposal. The roll-off container was exchanged with a new empty container that allowed the unsheltered residents of the encampment to dispose of another 1.59 tons over the next 24 hours.

Over the course of 48 hours, approximately 3.15 tons of waste was voluntarily collected and disposed of by the encampment.

The Thursday afternoon supply distribution was conducted by a smaller field team and was agreed to be minimally effective. Many members of the encampment were off-site, and others were confused by distribution of supplies several days in advance of the next roll-off arriving.

Week 1 Summary Metrics	
Blue Bags Distributed	73 bags
Sharps Containers Distributed	23 containers
Sharps Collected for Disposal	25 sharps
Trash Hauled to Landfill	3.15 tons

Throughout the week agency representatives monitored the condition of the adjacent road right-of-way for any signs of illegal roadside dumping. The property beyond the encampment area was also monitored for traffic entering for the purpose of illegal dumping. Although there was no evidence of illegal dumping during Week 1, this monitoring continued throughout the Pilot effort.

Week 2

The scope of the field outreach effort and site monitoring were significantly reduced during Week 2 based on the experience gained during Week 1. A larger capacity roll-off was requested, and only one supply distribution was conducted.

Schedule	Task	Number of Staff
Monday <i>(afternoon)</i>	Distribute bags and sharps containers, alert encampment of roll-off delivery.	1 field team, 4-5 agency representatives
Tuesday <i>(morning)</i>	Roll-off delivery to site.	No agency representatives
Tuesday <i>(afternoon)</i>	Check capacity of roll-off and condition of road right-of-way.	1-2 agency representatives
Wednesday <i>(afternoon)</i>	Check capacity of roll-off and condition of road right-of-way.	1-2 agency representatives
Thursday <i>(morning)</i>	Scheduled roll-off removal.	No agency representatives
Friday <i>(afternoon)</i>	Check condition of road right-of-way.	1-2 agency representatives

Table 2: Pilot Effort Week 2 - 4 Schedule

During the Monday supply distribution, the field team noticed several blue bags in use for trash collection around the encampment, and a pile of bagged waste staged near the roll-off drop location (Figure 11). A small group of encampment occupants requested extra bags and sharps containers to distribute to others in the encampment who weren't present for the supply distribution.

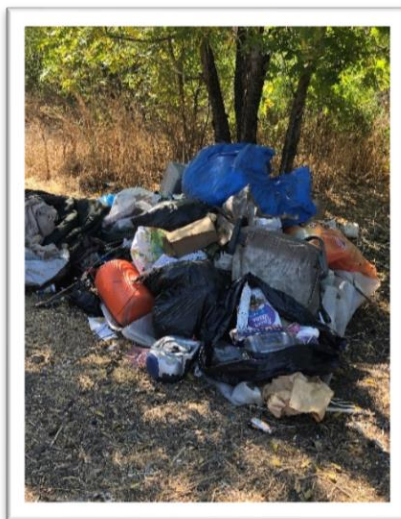


Figure 11: Bagged waste staged near the roll-off location ahead of Week 2.

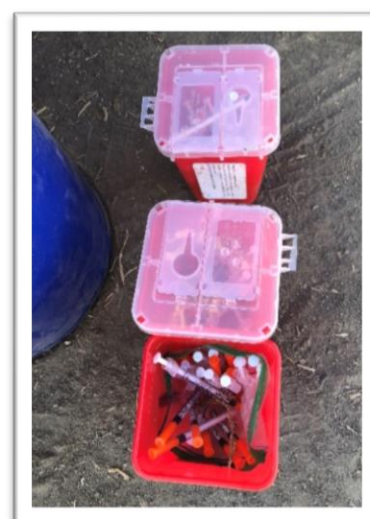


Figure 12: Sharps containers returned in the field during Week 2 of the Pilot effort.

The SLO Bangers volunteers collected three personal sharps containers (containing 150 sharps) for disposal (Figure 12). An additional three marked sharps containers were returned to the SLO Bangers during their weekly Wednesday hours (containing 120 sharps).

The larger capacity roll-off was sufficient for the two-day duration on site and allowed the encampment residents to dispose of 1.49 tons of waste. Staff continued to monitor the condition of the roll-off, the property, and road right-of-way throughout the week. No signs of illegal dumping were observed.

Week 2 Summary Metrics	
Blue Bags Distributed	25 bags
Sharps Containers Distributed	10 containers
Sharps Collected for Disposal	270 sharps
Trash Hauled to Landfill	1.49 tons

Week 3

The field team members of the Blue Bag Partnership agreed that the Week 2 field schedule was optimal and continued that schedule through Week 3 and Week 4. The overall condition of the encampment had improved noticeably by the beginning of Week 3. Several areas that had been used for depositing waste had been nearly completely cleared, and blue bags were seen in use around the encampment site (Figure 13).

Two personal sharps containers were collected during the Monday supply distribution, and eleven new empty containers were distributed.



Figure 13: Waste being collected for removal during Week 3.

During the Pilot effort, a resident of the encampment began voluntarily collecting sharps and containers from throughout the encampment from people who were uncomfortable returning the containers in the presence of law enforcement or generally in-person. The volunteer returned twelve marked containers (935 sharps) to the SLO Bangers for disposal during their Wednesday operating hours during Week 3. The commendable work of this volunteer significantly increased the total impact of the SLO Bangers and greatly benefitted community health and safety within the encampment.

Several unsheltered community members had vacated the encampment by Week 3, resulting in a smaller group of individuals participating in the Pilot effort. Despite the smaller number of participants, waste disposal continued during Week 3, ultimately removing another 1.26 tons of waste from the encampment.

Week 3 Summary Metrics	
Blue Bags Distributed	36 bags
Sharps Containers Distributed	11 containers
Sharps Collected for Disposal	956 sharps
Trash Hauled to Landfill	1.26 tons

Staff monitored the condition of the roll-off, the greater property and road right-of-way throughout the week. There were no signs of traffic to the property for the purpose of illegal dumping, and no trash bags deposited to the road right-of-way.

Week 4

The number of unsheltered community members residing in the encampment had decreased significantly by Week 4 of the Pilot effort. Several occupants may have chosen to relocate before potential enforcement of the issued notices to vacate. Many of the vacated areas had been almost completely cleared of trash and waste.



Figure 14: Waste staged for disposal during Week 4.

Those who remained in the encampment continued to diligently collect and dispose of trash and encouraged the participation of others. Several areas that had been cleared of debris over previous weeks were marked off or barricaded by members of the encampment to discourage resettlement or littering.

During the final Monday supply distribution, the field team notified remaining members of the encampment that it would be the final week of the Pilot effort, and that enforcement of the notices to vacate should be expected in the coming weeks.

CAT deputies and the SLO Bangers volunteers provided contact information for support services to continue working with the unsheltered community members who engaged in the Pilot effort. The field team expressed gratitude and thanked everyone who participated in the Pilot effort, and all the remaining encampment residents returned the thanks and gratitude for the opportunity to participate.

Two personal sharps containers were collected during the supply distribution (they were not containers supplied by the Pilot effort), and a small number of sharps were retrieved from the secure disposal box.

Staff monitored the condition of the roll-off, the greater property and road right-of-way throughout the week. There were no signs of traffic to the property for the purpose of illegal dumping and no trash bags deposited to the road right-of-way.

In the week following the conclusion of the Pilot effort, 13 bags of waste were deposited near the right-of-way of the road adjacent to the encampment. Five of the bags were marked blue bags from the Pilot effort. Staff from Caltrans District 5 removed the bags for disposal.

Week 4 Summary Metrics	
Blue Bags Distributed	36 bags
Sharps Containers Distributed	2 containers
Sharps Collected for Disposal	352 sharps
Trash Hauled to Landfill	0.91 tons

Un-Measurable Outcomes

Partner agencies agree that there were benefits and improvements in public health, water quality, and community engagement as a result of the Pilot effort. There were no plans to quantify these benefits at the outset of the Pilot effort, but the degree of improvement can be estimated through the experiences of the Partner agencies involved.

Public health benefits

The Blue Bag Partnership not only disposed of potentially contaminated sharps on-site, removing them as a source of infection in the community, but also provided sharps containers so that newly generated used sharps could be safely stored until disposal. Though the majority of people who are experiencing homelessness do not inject drugs, the community does disproportionately struggle with substance use disorders, including injection drug use.⁴ Engaging with people at the encampment presented an opportunity to provide them the resources to avoid blood-borne infectious diseases such as Hepatitis B, Hepatitis C, and HIV. This is especially important for people who inject drugs, as injection drug use accounts for almost 10% of new HIV cases, and 64% of people diagnosed with acute Hepatitis C inject drugs.⁵ People generally acquire these infections through sharing of syringes (and other supplies) due to lack of adequate sterile materials.

SLO Bangers provided contact information (verbally and on the containers) for the syringe exchange program (SEP) where people using sharps could get tested for Hepatitis C, HIV, and receive sterile harm reduction supplies, including condoms. Building stronger community linkages to the SLO Bangers SEP increases the opportunity for further education on overdose prevention, and the use/acquisition of Naloxone kits to reverse overdoses. Future iterations of the Blue Bag Partnership might be more impactful on public health by including direct outreach; providing Naloxone kits and overdose prevention training on-site at the encampments, and providing hygiene and wound care kits to people in need.

Water quality, pollutant load reduction

There were no water quality measurements take in the waterway adjacent to the Pilot site either before and after, or upstream and downstream of the effort. Despite the visible improvement in site conditions, there are many potentially confounding factors that would prevent a direct correlation between water quality measurements and trash removal in the adjacent area. However, removing trash and waste from the riparian corridor reduces the potential for rain events and elevated flows to mobilize pollutants to the waterway and transport them downstream.

Community Engagement

Several of the encampment occupants conveyed a greater sense of belonging in the community for 'doing their part' to improve the conditions of the encampment and helping others. They reported collecting and disposing of trash generated by others and encouraging other members of the encampment to participate.

During the period of the Pilot project, a well-known non-profit hosted a large public event near the encampment site. An unsheltered participant contacted the County to request that the roll-off remain onsite for an additional day so the encampment could continue cleaning the area ahead of the event.

While it isn't possible to quantify the benefits of increased community engagement, restoring community pride and a sense of belonging are important auxiliary benefits of the program.

Challenges and Opportunities Associated with the Partnership

At the conclusion of the Pilot effort, each of the partnering agencies were invited to share their perspective on the challenges and opportunities associated with the Blue Bag Partnership. The perspective of participating unsheltered community members, non-profit partners, and public agencies are presented in this section.

Perspective: Unsheltered Community Members

A small group of unsheltered community members gave their perspective on the Blue Bag Partnership at the conclusion of the Pilot effort in interviews with a Hope's Village volunteer. They were asked to describe the trash disposal situation at the encampment prior to the Pilot effort:

"To dispose of trash from a homeless camp in SLO, logistics is everything. You have to sort, load, and haul the trash to a trash receptacle where it can legally be thrown out. It's a time-consuming activity that can take 3 or 4 hours and is embarrassing and intrusive."

"The trash builds up in camp to such a large volume that we have no choice but to get rid of it. We look carefully at what to throw away, and because of the effort required to get it to a legal trash container, if we're not sure, we keep the items in camp, where they accumulate."

They were also asked to describe the impact to the encampment from having a trash pickup program during the Pilot effort:



"The 'Pilot Program' is somewhat like residential curbside trash pickup. Helps keep our camp tidy and keeps rodents away. Was a great morale boost for everyone. Homeless people adjacent to our camp also brought trash from their location. We need a legal place to dispose of trash, and this pilot program provided that. So many mountain lions, deer, tree rats and ground rodents in our area. Less trash means less negative interactions with wildlife."

"I was grateful that I got to participate in the Trash Pilot Program. The convenient location of the program dumpsters allowed us to not only get rid of all the trash and items we did not need, but allowed us to dispose of trash left in the area by other homeless people that came before us."

"Cool program. We don't like living in and seeing all the trash. The pilot program allowed us to 'roll the trash out to the curb' - real nice and a lot easier. Showed that 'people cared about me, giving us a shot'. We are capable human beings and we do care about the environment."





Perspective: SLO Bangers Syringe Exchange Program

Participating in the Pilot effort gave the SLO Bangers the opportunity to provide safe syringe litter disposal to people who are living in extreme poverty and who have various challenges that prevent them from safe disposal. Through this we empowered them to maintain a safe camp site and void of used syringes laying around, eliminating reuse of syringes and accidental needle sticks. This is a first step for helping to prevent the transmission and spread of HIV and Hepatitis C. Our participation in the Pilot effort has resulted in relationships with campers that are ongoing, some participants are still bringing in used syringes from the site a month after the Pilot effort ended and really feel an ownership over their contribution.

Syringe exchange programs can be stigmatized in the community by people who do not understand their valuable contribution to public health. One of the challenges for the SLO Bangers is gaining the respect of agencies that might have seen us in unfavorable light due to stigma surrounding injection drug use and the population we serve. Another challenge was separating the syringe exchange goals from those of City Parks, Department of Fish and Wildlife and law enforcement agencies, while still promoting the Pilot effort and encouraging people to participate.

With that in mind, it was also difficult to gain trust within the encampment community, and especially maintain that trust while they remain at risk of citations, fines, and evictions. Though safe disposal of used syringes is an important part of SLO Bangers mission, and we gained many community connections through the Pilot effort, going forward it will be important to balance how to best help and empower people living in the encampments with the clean-up aspects of the program.

Participants were more likely to trust a known community resource like SLO Bangers in accepting and sharing sharps containers vs. law enforcement officers, and it is important that their trust is not misplaced. We were able to engage with people that are difficult to connect with, and established working relationships with folks from the camps who want to work with us to promote the health of their community. The Pilot effort also brought us together with other community programs that we have not worked with before. Building community relations is crucial, an essential part of that is meeting people where they are at, which is key to a program like this working. The SLO Bangers are hopeful that these new relationships will continue and grow in the future towards the common goals of a healthy, safe community.



Perspective: City of San Luis Obispo

The City of San Luis Obispo was very pleased to have been a part of this collaborative Pilot program. Engaging the unsheltered homeless community has been a long-standing challenge for the City of San Luis Obispo from a logistical point of view as a single agency with specific requirements. But, with the partnerships identified here in this report, we are hopeful that this Pilot program will be a catalyst for future efforts to reduce the pollutant load into our local creeks and wildlife areas. The land use goals for the area where the Pilot program took place was one of the key aspects the City had to keep in mind (the property is an Ecological Reserve not open to the public and was established to protect and restore a floodplain and establish wetland habitat) but by considering the bigger environmental picture for the Pilot effort, City staff was able to support the partnered effort.

With the increased number of unsheltered homeless and the lack of adequate housing options, the unsheltered community needs additional support, but the logistics of additional support, as identified in the report, were a key point for City staff. Internal collaboration between City Administration, Parks and Recreation and Police departments took place, in addition to the larger group meetings to ensure staff were all on the same page and were able to participate effectively.

Legacy trash from previous encampments was uncovered during the weekly walks but not collected from the on-site population helping with the trash removal program. After the Pilot was completed, City staff had contractors go in and remove all the rest of the trash from the property. One of the main goals of the Pilot program for the City was to reduce the amount of trash potentially getting into our local waterways. However, the unsheltered homeless present not only an environmental problem, but also a social problem and the Pilot program brought many partners together to continue to expand the amount of resources available to address the needs of the unsheltered population and will hopefully be emulated in other areas to continue to make the connections for all parties involved to support more positive outcomes.



Perspective: County of San Luis Obispo

Staff from the Sheriff's Office, Social Services and Public Works worked in close collaboration to facilitate the Pilot effort. The Pilot effort was unique in the collaboration between multiple departments to address health, safety and environmental concerns associated with an occupied encampment. The ability to draw on the subject matter expertise of staff across several disciplines was important in planning and coordination, and was a significant factor in the success of the Pilot effort.

County staff had hoped that the Pilot effort could also serve as a bridge for unsheltered community members to begin engaging with support services that might lead to housing. Extending the work of the SLO Bangers into the field provided a critical link to community members who might not have been familiar with their program or had the means to take part in their weekly service hours. Building trust, and a willingness to engage with a variety of service providers in the field is an important step in overcoming long-term homelessness. Establishing relationships between unsheltered community members and providers of supportive services can be a critical first step in transitioning into temporary or permanent housing.

10. Citations

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