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El Dorado County wants to halt construction of housing project for Native women. Here's why

By [Jenavieve Hatch](#) and

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A sign for the Rescue Deer Valley group greets drivers on Deer Valley Road in El Dorado County. The group opposes two grant-funded residential facilities for vulnerable Native women. Jenavieve Hatch*The Sacramento Bee*

Two California residential facilities that would house vulnerable Native women are supposed to break ground next month in El Dorado County.

But the local community is mobilizing against the project. The county Board of Supervisors is appealing to state and federal lawmakers for help to block it. At a Board of Supervisors meeting last month, more than 20 community members spoke up and most objected.

The project, which will be built in the Shingle Springs-Rescue area in the county, was [approved in September 2023](#) by the Behavioral Health and Continuum Integration Program in the state Department of Health Care Services. It's going to consist of two facilities off of Deer Valley Road: one is a 16-bed, single story residence for Native, pregnant women under the age of 18 that and will accommodate young children if necessary. The second is an assisted living home, with 15 bedrooms, to serve Native women with disabilities who need assistance with things like bathing and grooming. Each center will have live-in staff members.

The project is part of the Community Care Expansion (CCE) program, established by Assembly Bill 172, which passed in 2021 as part of the 2021-22 budget. The bill allocated \$805 million to go toward adult and senior care facilities that serve those on Social Security, including those who are homeless or at risk of homelessness, as well as people with behavioral health conditions. The CCE program is administered by the California Department of Social Services.

HomeCA, a nonprofit that seeks to shelter the unhoused, will manage the treatment facility with Native Directions, a San Joaquin County-based organization that supports Native Americans with substance use disorders. Counties opt in to the CCE program; San Joaquin has, but El Dorado hasn't.

But at the Jan. 30 Board of Supervisors meeting, many constituents, voiced opposition to the project. They cited issues such as increased traffic, potential damage to the environment, wildfire risk, and loss of property value. Many also sent letters to the Board before the meeting. A neighborhood group called Rescue Deer Valley, led by Rescue resident Chris Silva, sent a 40-page document to the Board in January with questions and concerns about the project.

HomeCA and Native Directions say there are serious misunderstandings about what the project actually is. "Our mission is to fill a significant gap in services for tribal communities," said Ramona Valadez, Native Directions Inc. executive director in a joint statement with HomeCA, "promoting equality and access to essential support services. This initiative underscores our commitment to creating residential, not medical, facilities catering exclusively to the needs of tribal women."

Clarifying 'misunderstandings' about 'first of its kind' care facilities

Written in large, black font on the [Rescue Deer Valley website](#) is a warning: "Substance Abuse Centers in

Rescue on Deer Valley.” A “Click here to learn more” button takes the reader to another loud warning: “Two Large Substance Abuse Medical Facilities HERE, in Rescue?”

Native Directions and HomeCA say that the centers are not medical facilities, and that the opponents are misinformed.

The 16-bed residence for pregnant young women is being built “to create a residential facility that feels like a home, that offers person-centered, culturally-sensitive care,” said Valadez. “Our services include counseling, horticultural, music, and arts therapy, tailored for healing and supporting young mothers, some of whom are recovering from substance use disorders or escaping abusive situations.”

“To be clear: these are not medical facilities,” she continued. “These are care homes for young mothers and women with disabilities who will still need to access medical care through their doctor at nearby medical offices and facilities.”

The young women will get medical care — both for their pregnancies and for any potential substance-related issues — outside of the centers.

The perinatal residence will be 7,000 square feet on an 18-acre parcel off of Deer Valley Road, and will be tucked away from the street on the end of the lot that backs up to federally owned land in El Dorado County in the town of Rescue, an unincorporated community just north of Cameron Park and Shingle Springs. As of the 2010 census, the population was 2,568.

The assisted living facility will be similar in size on a 10-acre parcel in a neighboring lot. Both were chosen for the same reason other Rescue residents choose to live there: for their natural beauty, privacy, and rural environment.

“The selection of Rescue as the location for this facility was a deliberate and thoughtful decision made in consultation with the Native communities we aim to serve,” said the statement from HomeCA, which worked with local Miwok tribe members and the El Dorado County Planning and Building and Behavioral Health departments.

Because the projects are funded from state-approved grants, they do not need official county approval.

Silva and other neighbors aren’t happy to see the state overriding the county on a major development project, and while each individual has their own specific concerns — traffic, water usage, property value — they are all unified by that one complaint: government overreach.

Silva lives right next door to the parcel of land where the perinatal facility would be built. He lived in El Dorado Hills, just down Highway 50, for 26 years, and moved to Rescue over a decade ago, mostly for the rural feel.

And rural it is.

A quick turn off of Green Valley Road — the major thoroughfare connecting El Dorado County with the town of Folsom — Deer Valley Road winds the through the foothills in two narrow lanes, shaded by oak trees, with the occasional single-lane bridge. Cows and goats look at passersby with curiosity. Recent storms left several of the houses in the area without power, and a wind-thrown tree left part of the road inaccessible, too.

Silva and other neighbors became aware of the project in October 2023, a month after HomeCA and Native Directions received the grant to fund them. A group of about 15 neighbors have been meeting since November 2023 to try to push back against the project. That group became Rescue Deer Valley.

Silva is not opposed to such facilities existing, he told The Bee. He just doesn’t think El Dorado County is the right place for them, especially since it’s not opted into the CCE program.

“What we are trying to do is keep it very practical,” he said. “We’re ignoring the fact of whether this is needed or not. We are not against a community-based facility, just do it in the right place where it makes sense for the patients.”

Silva is aware of how the opposition might come off — like they’re against a support center for a vulnerable group. Proponents of the project “immediately jump to ‘Well, we need these, you’re not considering the people it would serve.’ That’s false,” he said. “That’s not part of our argument. Our argument is that this is the wrong location, and that the state needs to consider a little more county oversight before they allow something like this.”

Wariness of government overreach is common in the conservative-leaning El Dorado County, and the Rescue Deer Valley website capitalizes on this shared concern.

“Dangerous traffic. Urban-style commercial structures in a rural residential community. An end-run around local planning and zoning laws. Patients imported from a distant county. An unfunded drain on county services. Dangerous traffic impacts. A potential spike in crime. Noise and parking headaches. This effort is forcing a square peg into a round hole,” the website says.

HomeCA and Native Directions remain steadfast that they are meeting all parameters of AB 172, which waives certain requirements, including California Environmental Quality Act compliance, in favor of creating more housing opportunities and meeting the needs of the state.

They also insist that they have considered the Rescue Deer Valley concerns and confident that these are still the best properties for the facilities. Regarding traffic concerns, they say that because the staff will be live-in, there won’t be much coming and going, and that traffic on the narrow rural road will not be exacerbated.

The groups have a plan for fire safety and other emergencies, too. “Our location provides an additional route to access medical facilities, including the Shingle Springs Wellness Center, which is operated by the Miwok tribe and capable of meeting our residents’ medical needs in a culturally sensitive manner.” The Shingle Springs Wellness Center provides comprehensive health care to the area, including Native-specific services.

“That’s that NIMBY idea, ‘We don’t want you here’”

Some members of the Native community see the language of the Rescue Deer Valley website as thinly veiled stereotypes against them.

“When you read and see words like, ‘It will increase crime rates’... the language is very stereotypical of the attitude of some of the people in that region,” said Albert Titman, deputy director for the Native Dads Network, who is also involved in substance use disorder treatment for tribal people in California, and is familiar with the proposed Rescue facilities and Native Directions leadership.

El Dorado “has been historically racist,” said Titman, of the county that is [87.4% white](#). “For a long time, Natives weren’t really treated very well there ... and I do see stigmatizing language here. Once again, it’s that NIMBY idea, ‘Not in my backyard, we don’t want you here, you don’t belong here.’”

Some of these tensions were on display at the Jan. 30 board meeting, where the HomeCA Native Liaison, Deanne Pineda, was interrupted by community members during public comment until Board Chair Wendy Thomas forcefully told the crowd, “Absolutely no” until they stopped. Having the wisdom of Native Elders, including those of Miwok heritage, is crucial for the young women and disabled women who will find home in the Rescue facilities. Plus, said Titman, the Native community is “the community” just as much as those who live on Deer Valley Road.

“The tribal people that are in that region have creation stories that begin in the area of El Dorado,” he said. “Their burial mounds and village sites and ceremonial sacred places have existed right there, where that treatment facility is, right there. So when they say, ‘The people of this community...’ Well, the Native people are of the community.”

He said the Rescue Deer Valley group is using fear tactics that stigmatize an already vulnerable group. “This could happen to you in your community,” he said, with a laugh. “The Indians are coming with their money and their treatment programs, they want to steal your rights! They want to circumvent your policies and procedures!”

It’s all fear mongering, he said.

Asking lawmakers to intervene

The Board of Supervisors has been reaching out to state lawmakers for support in stepping in to, at the very least, slow the project down to mitigate any potential problems. “We are looking to you to assist with ensuring that the Department of Health Care Services (DHCS) is doing everything in its power to oversee these projects and minimize the negative impacts of these planned projects and, preferably, relocate them to a more suitable location,” the board wrote to state Sen. Marie Alvarado-Gil, D-Jackson and Assemblyman Joe Patterson, R-Rocklin. Neither elected official were in the state Legislature when AB 172 was passed.

“An unintended consequence of AB 172 is that it completely overrides local land uses and allows nonconforming uses to automatically be considered conforming,” the board wrote, “which bypasses enforcement of regulations that would normally provide for quality of life, compatibility, and public health and safety.”

At the Jan. 30 board meeting, all five board members voted to pursue further action to prevent the facility’s construction by directing the county’s attorneys to explore any California Environmental Quality Assurance compliance issues, and authorizing Thomas, who represents the Placerville area in District 3, to write a letter to federal representatives encouraging them to intervene.

“Knowing that the (federal) Bureau of Land Management is the manager for that reserve, they need to know what’s going on here,” said Supervisor John Hidahl, who represents District 1, which encompasses El Dorado Hills. The proposed land parcels are near federally owned reserves.

“The BLM has leadership responsibilities and management responsibilities,” he said. “They should be aware of this before this just happens. Because I do believe that over a period of time there’s going to be substantial environmental inputs from this facility affecting that reserve.”

El Dorado County is represented at the federal level by Republican Rep. Tom McClintock, who has not responded to requests for comment.

The board also voted to direct county staff to get involved with related departments to “minimize negative impacts” of the project. Alvarado-Gil, then- chair of the Senate Human Services Committee, has heard the complaints from the community, and [wrote to the DHCS](#) requesting “urgent assistance in responding to questions and concerns from county leaders and constituents” about the project. Patterson, who serves as vice chair of the Assembly Housing and Development Committee, said that he too has concerns about how the county didn’t get a say in the approval of the project. He has reached out to the DHCS, and told The Bee he’s specifically concerned about how a county that has not opted into the CCE program could still end up becoming a site for a CCE program recipient in another county. In the meantime, the community-led Rescue Deer Valley, which is soliciting donations for “legal fees, investigative fees, public relation fees, etc.,” plan to do everything possible to halt the project.

“We would love to see Native Directions do the right thing for their patients,” said Silva.

“They have decades of experience in San Joaquin County. They should know that county really well, and all logic says this should be built in San Joaquin County.”