

IMPACT ARCHITECTS

California Local News Fellowship:

Case Study 1: Fresnoland

September 2024

Background

The California Local News Fellowship is a state-funded program designed to increase the capacity of local newsrooms and support early career journalists. The ultimate goal is to ensure that California communities, particularly underserved communities, have reliable access to high quality news and information so that they can make informed decisions about matters that affect their lives and the health of their communities. Since 2023, the California Local News Fellowship has awarded 76 fellowships over two cohorts, covering over half of California's counties that represent the vast majority of the state's population. The following case study will be the first of several that highlight the ways in which fellows are making a difference in their communities through their journalism.

Pablo Orihuela's journey to journalism was not linear. He began college with an interest in STEM and the goal of becoming a computer scientist. Along the way, something shifted. "It was starting to become an act of labor rather than something I enjoyed doing," Oriheula said. He pivoted to something he *did* fully enjoy: writing. And that interest ultimately led Orihuela to pursue journalism as a professional path. He worked his way up to becoming the editor-in-chief for his college newspapers, first at Pierce Community College and then at CSU, Northridge. His pivot paid off. After graduating from CSU Northridge, Orihuela was accepted — through a highly competitive process — into the California Local News Fellowship program. In fall 2023, he was placed at Fresnoland, a small nonprofit news organization in California's Central Valley that launched in 2020. His assigned beat was housing. "I felt intimidated knowing that this was going to be my beat," Orihuela said. He recognized that the crisis in affordable housing was front and center in California and a key focus area for Fresnoland. Executive Director and Managing Editor Danielle Bergstrom called housing "one of the most critical beats" at Fresnoland.

In his first year as a fellow at Fresnoland, Orihuela has worked to build trust with residents, developed a professional network with others interested in housing, and, most importantly for the purposes of the fellowship, produced journalism that has made a meaningful difference for Fresno communities.

Fresnoland and the Housing Beat

Fresno County is situated in the San Joaquin Valley, roughly in the middle of the state. It has a population of just over one million residents, more than half of whom identify as Hispanic or Latino, according to 2022 Census Bureau estimates. About 44 percent of households speak a language other than English at home, the median household income in the county is about 25 percent lower than California as a whole, and affordable housing is a critical issue. According to the [California Housing Partnership](#), renters in Fresno County need to earn 1.6 times (\$25.96 per hour) the California minimum wage in order to afford the average monthly cost of a rental unit (\$1,350).

When Fresnoland launched, it didn't do so with a focus on housing. Rather, the topic emerged as a critical issue in the early days of the Covid-19 pandemic. Bergstrom said residents — especially community members whose incomes were affected by pandemic-related business closures — were concerned about paying rent and avoiding the possibility of eviction in a time of deep uncertainty. Fresnoland began putting together resource guides for rental assistance programs, examining the ways in which local leaders throughout the country were using emergency funds to help subsidize rent and considering how those strategies might work in Fresno.

Bergstrom realized that there was a significant audience for information about housing, which ultimately led to making it an ongoing focal point for Fresnoland. She said that Fresno has the perception of being the “affordable part of California” because housing prices and rent are lower than the Bay Area and Los Angeles, for instance. But she notes that housing is still expensive. The median value of a home in Fresno County is \$338,000, according to U.S. Census Bureau estimates, while the median household income is \$67,756. Additionally, Bergstrom asserts that the affordability problem is being compounded by the growth of work-from-home models, which have attracted people from more expensive parts of California to buy relatively cheaper homes in Fresno.

La Hacienda Mobile Park

When Orihuela arrived at Fresnoland in September 2023, his first assignment was to continue reporting on a Fresnoland he had been covering for more than two years. In 2021, there was a [fatal fire](#) at the Trail's End Mobile Home Park (later renamed La Hacienda) in northeast Fresno. Subsequent reporting showed that the state of California didn't regularly inspect mobile home parks, which led the city of Fresno to take over responsibility for enforcing health and safety codes in the parks. From 2021 until mid-2023, Trail's End continued to be the center of safety concerns. Even more pressing for residents was the park's sale to Harmony Communities, which sought to sell the land and, in April 2023, sent residents a letter informing them that they had 12 months to relocate or sell their mobile homes, as the park would be closing.

Orihuela picked up the story at this point. His first publication for FresnoLand was titled "[Major decision looms on future of mobile home park.](#)" Published in late September 2023, the story followed a tenant, Patricia Shawn, who was closely watching whether or not the Fresno City Council would approve the company's proposal for closure, which would mean eviction for her and all other remaining residents.

While the story was about a city council decision, it focused on what was at stake for tenants. Orihuela quoted the tenants' legal representative, Mariah Thompson, of the [California Rural Legal Assistance](#), a nonprofit law firm that provides pro bono civil legal support to low income, rural residents: "This is the last stop for many, if not all of them, between them and homelessness." Orihuela showed the human stakes involved in the city council decision by following Shawn, her close observation of the proceedings, and her worry about what would happen if the park closed: "I'm trying to find someplace new, but it's very hard," Orihuela quoted Shawn as saying, "I don't really make much money, and there's no place I can afford." Shawn was later evicted from La Hacienda, even as the park remained open.

Pablo Orihuela's Reporting on La Hacienda Estates, September 2023–May 2024

- > [Major decision looms on future of mobile home park in Fresno](#)
- > [Fresno mobile home park residents seek eviction protections after another setback](#)
- > [‘Huge win’ for Fresno mobile home park residents as city rejects closure plans](#)
- > [Commission weighs major rent hike at Fresno mobile home park](#)
- > [Commission raises rent at Fresno mobile home park, but residents still say it's a win](#)
- > [Timeline: Inside the nearly three-year struggle for residents at Fresno's La Hacienda mobile home park](#)
- > [Fresno will ask a judge to stop a mobile home park from closing](#)
- > [Millions available for Fresno mobile home parks after city rejects affordable housing project](#)
- > [Fresno mobile home park owner argues that court, city can't force business to remain open](#)
- > [Fresno mobile home residents score 'huge win' over corporate owners – but the fight isn't over](#)
- > [Fresno pitches in \\$3.5M for troubled mobile home park, but will the bankrupt company sell it?](#)

Over the next several months, Orihuela published nine additional stories about La Hacienda and efforts to keep the park open and affordable for its residents. The reporting centered heavily on the implication of legal decisions, the tenants' argument to use eminent domain to keep the park open, and, ultimately, the city's effort to subsidize the sale of the park to a buyer that would keep the park open for residents. The whole of the reporting illustrates how the vulnerable residents used a variety of resources, such as pro bono legal support and airing concerns at city council meetings, to protect themselves. The effort also created cohesion among residents, even if the circumstances were challenging. As one resident Orihuela spoke to said, "Harmony brought us together as a community, and we're stronger than we were before We're friendlier to each other than we were before because we got to know each other. God had a reason for doing this."

Orihuela said the relationship-building he had done with community members enabled him to highlight their concerns. He said that two weeks into his fellowship, he set aside a day to visit La Hacienda. "I just walked the entire mobile home park and introduced myself to all the tenants," he said. He passed out business cards, inviting residents to call him with issues and discuss it either on or off the record." Bergstrom says Orihuela's efforts to build trust with residents have contributed to his reporting success so far. She also notes that Orihuela spent time in the community and consistently reported on developments, which enabled him to provide a broader context. She said he was sensitive to "bearing witness to the story" of the tenants. Bergstrom notes that this story is important because it shows a "microcosm of how people become homeless, as mobile home parks are often the last place to go before there's nothing else."

Orihuela also made a connection with Mariah Thompson, the attorney representing the tenants in court. When asked to describe the value of housing reporting in general, Thompson said that it is "massively important."

"We relied on the media to elevate our clients' stories, particularly around the impact of this park closing," she said. She also credits Orihuela's journalism for creating government accountability: Since the initial fatal fire in 2021, the city of Fresno has joined California Rural Legal Assistance in suing to keep the park open and in May, the state of California committed \$3.5 million to a third party to subsidize the purchase of the park and prevent its closure.

Beyond the specific plight of La Hacienda, Orihuela's FresnoLand reporting has broader implications for other communities. Thompson said that, "What's happening in the case that Pablo has been reporting on, for us, is at the cutting edge of some pretty significant developments in California that are going to impact parks across the state," such as "when and how a mobile home landlord can shut down its property and whether or not it has to give people payment to leave, and what the limits of those laws are."

As of this writing, La Hacienda Mobile Home Park remains open, although tenancy has declined in the midst of legal conflict and the threat of closure. Regardless of the outcome, Orihuela's reporting has provided space for the tenant's voices to be heard, held local government accountable, and has added to FresnoLand's already deep collection of reporting on a crucial issue in California's Central Valley.