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Denise Pratt and fiancé Mark Reeve, at the Homeless Community Resource Center, can boast a happy ending. Currently living in the back of their car, the center has helped them find work and will soon be moving into a cabin.

A hand up, not a handout

Resource center helps people looking for home

By JOHN ENDERS
ASSOCIATED PRESS

Even as the homeless elsewhere are ticketed, arrested or driven away, Santa Cruz, known for its liberal politics has moved toward ending years of squabbling by giving the homeless not a home, but a way to help them get one.

The Homeless Community Resource Center serves homeless people who can't help themselves, including alcoholics and the mentally ill. But its main purpose is to get people capable of holding a job off the streets.

The center, which opened its doors in March, offers a shower, locker space, meals and job counseling for Santa Cruz's several hundred homeless people, mostly single men.

There are no beds available, so many still sleep in the woods nearby.

But some 200 to 250 people a day start showing up at about 8 a.m. to use the center's services. They are gone by 6 p.m. Most of the center's neighbors in an industrial part of town tolerate the operation; one mechanic nearby offers parts at cost for those who need to fix their cars.

Denise Pratt, 35, arrived a few months ago from the Los Angeles area. She lives with her fiancé, Mark Reeves, in the back of a car. They met at the center. The center has allowed them to find work for him and a cabin

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Karen Gillette, center director

they hope to move into this fall in nearby Felton. They were to be married Sunday.

"It's a happy ending," Pratt said.

Many of the center's clients use it to line up jobs. Others lay out jewelry-making tools or leather goods in an effort to make things that can be sold on the street or at bazaars.

"It's my lifeline," said Don McColley, 47, as he fashions a belt out of leather he has bartered for from a nearby tannery.

Today's cooperative attitude toward helping the homeless did not exist just a few years ago.

In 1988 and 1989, Santa Cruz police were arresting the homeless for camping without a permit. Activists with an in-your-face attitude were handing out free food downtown in a program known as SWAP — Soup Without A Permit.

Faced with homeless in increasing numbers, many begging along tourist crowded downtown streets, tempers flared. The situation was similar to problems today in San Francisco and many other major cities across the country.

A backlash followed.

In 1989, anti-homeless protesters marched downtown with signs reading "Take Back Our Town" taped to baseball bats. During the 1990 city elections, dealing with the homeless was a key issue.

Then something funny happened. The homeless themselves organized, holding meetings to define the help they needed. And they began approaching City Hall with reasonable requests for effective services. They found a receptive ear.

Don Lane, a restaurant owner and former city council member and mayor, said community leaders just started working together instead of against each other.

"There was a tremendous amount of conflict," he said. "It was just sucking up too much political energy in the community."

In addition, following the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake which devastated downtown Santa Cruz, merchants began talking about how to keep the growing number of homeless out of the central shopping district. And

homeless advocates began talking about how to best provide services.

They found common ground. They decided to allow the meal program, on land owned by the city where the center now stands, and later to support the resource center. Federal, state, county and city funds finance it.

"The community decided to stop fighting about it and do something," said center director Karen Gillette, a former county computer programmer who knows about homelessness first-hand. When she first arrived in Santa Cruz, she had little money and slept on the beach.

"Everybody realized that driving people out of town was not working. They were not leaving," she said. "The politicians, the press, the police, the business owners, they changed their attitude."

Today, four separate programs on city land away from downtown offer the homeless services ranging from mental health counseling to church services to meals.

But the center — a place to do laundry, clean up, read newspaper want ads, call prospective employers and arrange for job training — is the most innovative.

Although some critics feared the center would become a sort of regional mecca for the homeless, that has not happened, Gillette said.