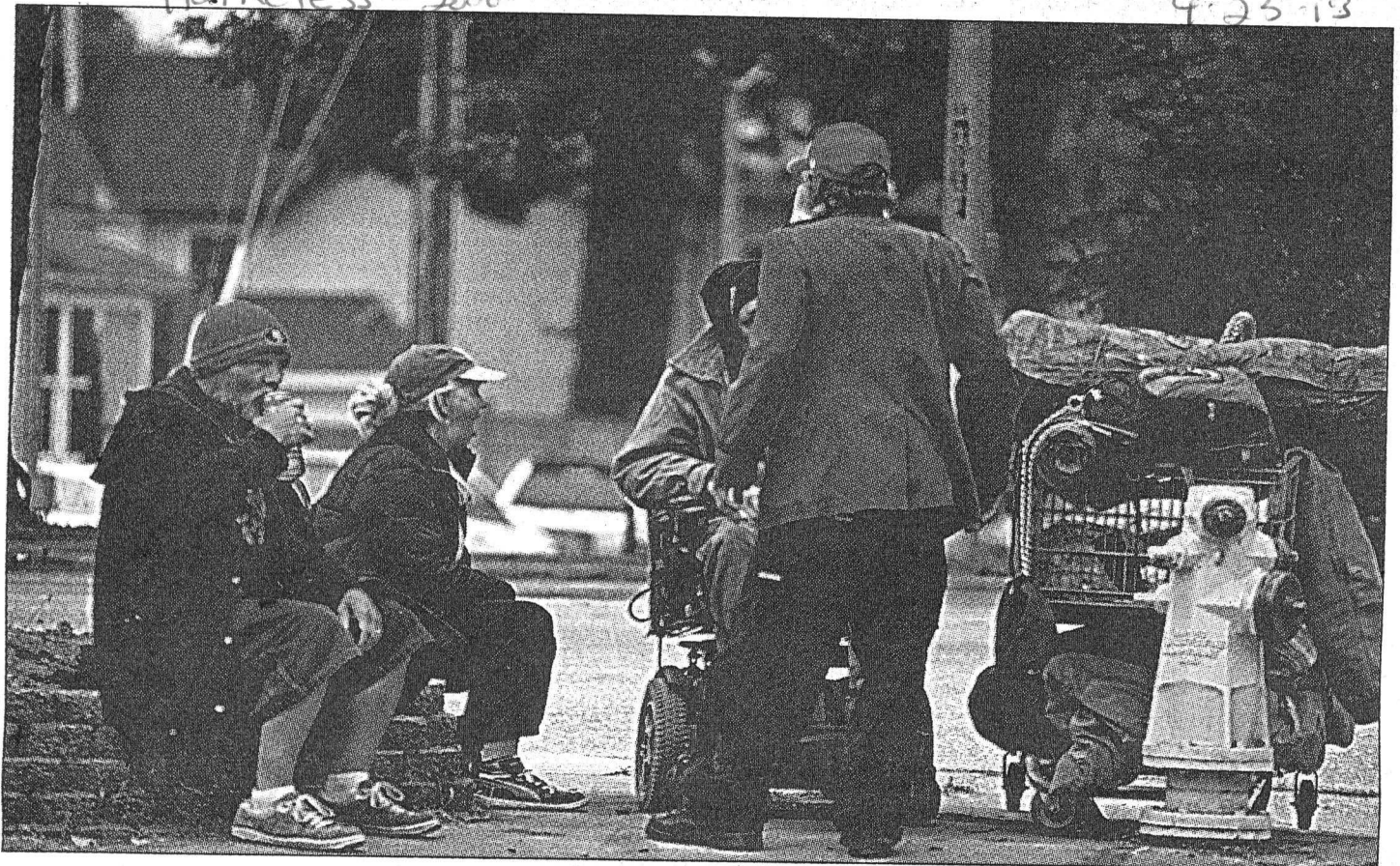


'We shouldn't alienate people'

Community forum on safety and compassion presents views of former homeless



Homeless people gather on an upper Ocean Street corner Wednesday morning.

DAN COYRO/SENTINEL

More than 100 turn out
at Santa Cruz High
to mostly show support

By SHANNA MCCORD

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SANTA CRUZ — The Santa Cruz High School auditorium was filled Wednesday with folks seeking insight on homelessness — a topic that vexes community leaders and often pits those who want to support homeless people against those who see the homeless as a main cause of local crime.

The community forum on safety and compassion was sponsored by several churches and nonprofits such as the Resource Center for Nonviolence, the Circle Church and United Way of Santa Cruz County.

Speakers included Susan Brutschy of Applied Survey Research of Watsonville, a group that conducts the annual homeless count across the county, and Christine Sippl, manager of the county's Homeless Persons Health Project at the Homeless Services Center on Coral Street.

Three former homeless people shared their personal stories with the crowd of more than 100 mostly sympathetic to the cause, adding a firsthand element to the discussion.

Homelessness has become an



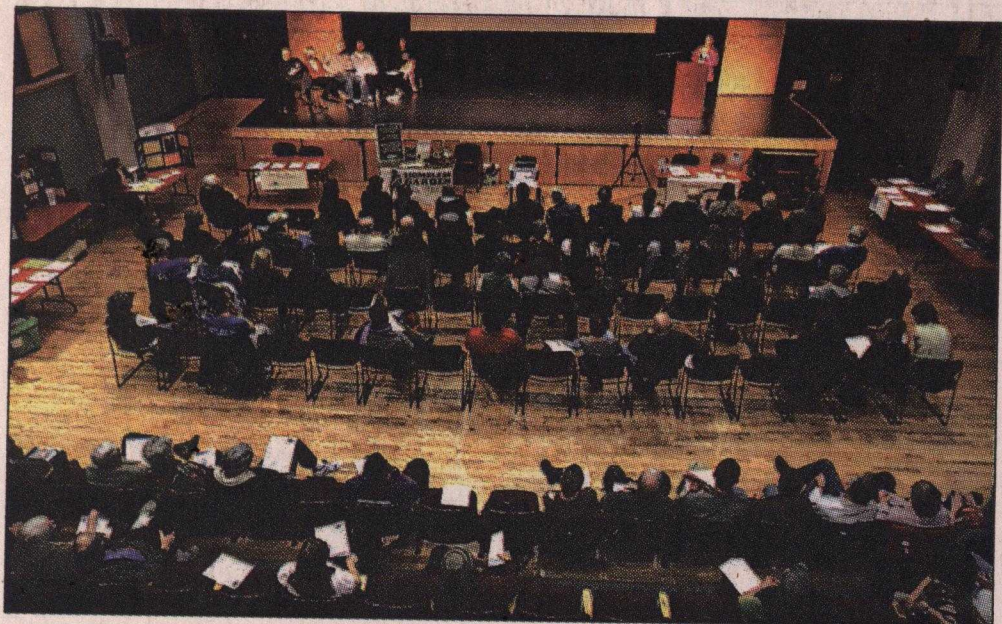
Jamie Logsdon at Wednesday's forum tells the story of how she ended up homeless.

SHMUEL THALER/SENTINEL

'Violent crime has very little to do with homelessness. If we clicked our heels and all the homeless people went away, it would not reduce the rate of violent crime in our town that much.'

THE REV. STEVE DEFIELDS, Circle Church

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SHMUEL THALER/SENTINEL

The Santa Cruz High School auditorium is filled with community members for a forum titled 'Homelessness and our Hometown' on Wednesday.

HOMELESS

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increasingly sensitive subject around Santa Cruz as police routinely find and close down illegal camps created by homeless. Residents regularly report finding used needles, trash and human waste in parks and at beaches.

The May 2012 stabbing death of downtown business owner Shannon Collins by a homeless man who had stayed four nights at the Paul Lee Loft at the Homeless Services Center sparked a cry from residents for increased oversight of homeless services and to find ways to make the city safer.

Forum moderator the Rev. Steve DeFields of the Circle Church said he often hears residents say they're frightened by homeless people and a perceived risk they pose. However, DeFields said he believes homelessness is not at the root of crime.

Homeless people are part of a vulnerable population that should not be feared, he said.

"Violent crime has very little to do with homelessness," DeFields said. "If we clicked our heels and all the homeless people went away, it would not reduce the rate of violent crime in our town that much."



Wearing a poncho in the morning drizzle, a man gathers his belongings in a downtown Santa Cruz park on Wednesday.

DAN COYRO/
SENTINEL

He cited the statistic that the average person is only three paychecks away from losing their home to demonstrate that homelessness can happen to anyone.

There are roughly 2,700 people without homes in Santa Cruz County, according to the census conducted in January 2011, which is up slightly from 2009, Brutschy said.

According to Sippl, homelessness is caused by severe poverty and poor government policies that ignore or make the situation worse.

She said the homelessness is exacerbated by lack of funding for treatment programs.

"Keeping people in their homes is a solvable problem," Sippl said. "We choose not to solve it."

Brutschy defended the illegal camps erected by the homeless.

"An encampment is a way for people to connect and develop a source of support," she said.

Santa Cruz resident Ana

Espinoza said she attended the forum to gather more information on a "human and just" solution to homelessness.

"I'm very interested in finding a solution for that community that's safe for everyone," Espinoza said. "There are socio-economic issues many families face. We shouldn't alienate people and ignore the issue. That doesn't help the community."

The Santa Cruz City Council will host a study session on homelessness at 7 p.m. Tuesday at City Hall.