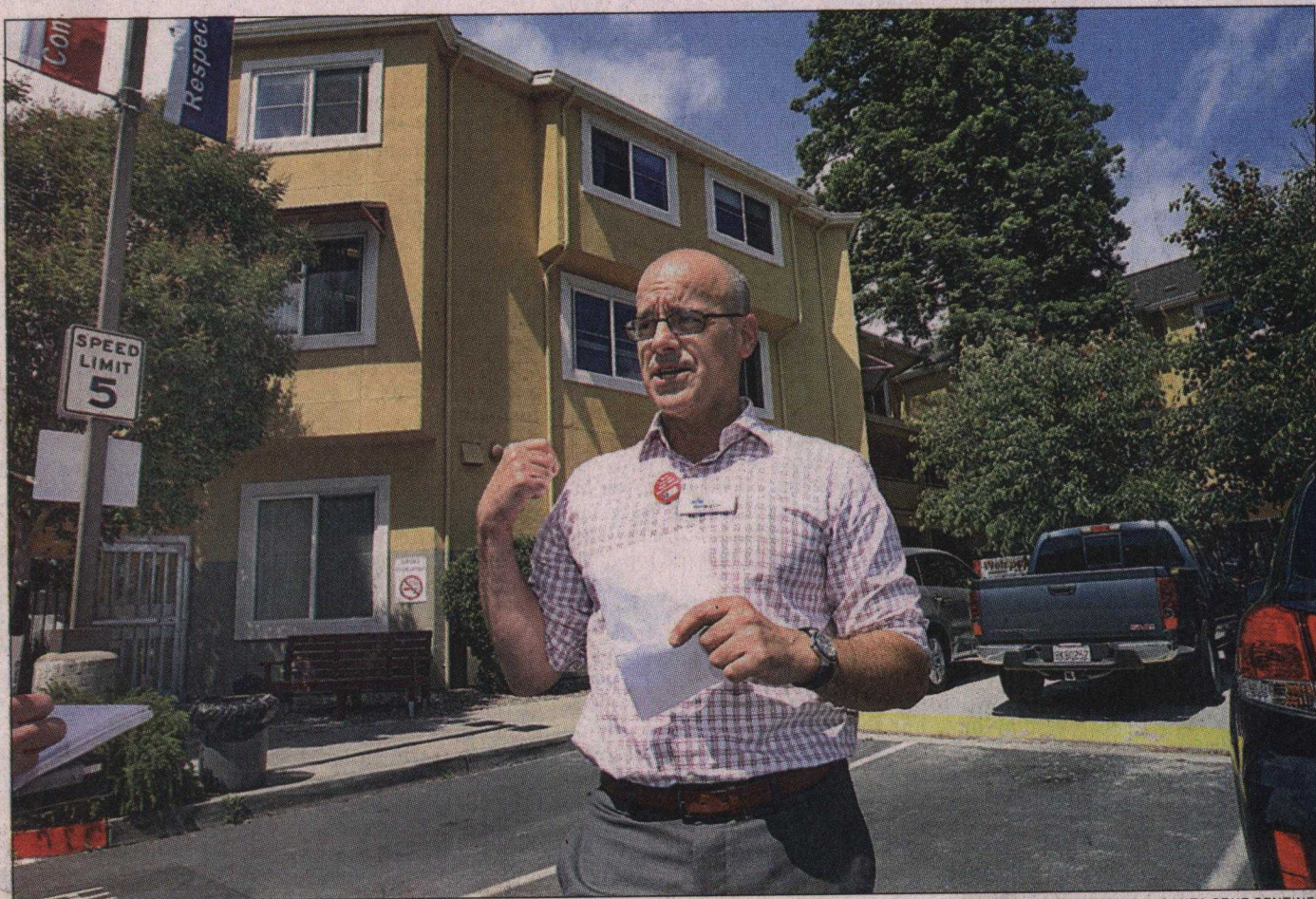


HOMELESS CENTER OFFERS TEMPORARY SANCTUARY



PHOTOS BY DAN COYRO — SANTA CRUZ SENTINEL

Homeless Services Center Executive Director Phil Kramer details the changes and new programs at the facility.

Homeless -
Shelters designed as transitional,
not final stop, as resources weighed

By Jessica A. York

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SANTA CRUZ » The Homeless Services Center's shelters at 115 Coral St. are not homes for the hundreds who gather there every night — they are temporary stops on the way to a home.

Executive director Phil Kramer has been working to underscore that message during his more than a year and a half at the helm of the non-profit.

"It should be welcoming and inviting and it should be a place where people can stabilize and rest for a moment while they're working on their plan," Kramer said during a recent interview. "This is not the place where they are going to permanently stay. It is about, how do we connect

them while they're here with that next step, into the community, into permanent housing, into reintegrating into the community?"

Nearly two years after the organization was forced to end its free daily meal offerings, lay off about 15 employees and make other drastic cutbacks to balance a budget dependent on community donations and shrinking government grants, the Homeless Services Center is working to reconstitute a vital institution despite insufficient resources.

Ease of access

Kramer said an important piece of his work has been to create "dignity of place" for those staying at the center, with aesthetic improvements such as new paint and carpeting, inspirational banners and

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New signage at the Homeless Services Center displays the center's main goal: finding homes for their clients.

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— Phil Kramer, Homeless Services Center executive director

Shelters

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improved landscaping. This fall, a \$120,000 grant from the Central California Alliance for Health will fund a project at one of the campus' shelters, the Paul Lee Loft, to remove its built-in wooden bunk bed frames, wardrobes and dressers — long exacerbating an off-and-on bedbug problem, Kramer said.

Program policies have also required a second look, Kramer said. Previously, loft clients were required to obtain a referral from social service agencies or nonprofits and have a defined "pathway to housing" to gain entry. Since April, the loft's bar for entry has been lowered, as it fills its roster again with referred clients and walk-ins alike, Kramer said.

"I think we're really looking for providing services to the more vulnera-

ble (people) and also without putting an extra step in front of them," said center Director of Programs Tom Stagg. "I imagine there were people turned away from getting into the loft because they had no case managers."

Stagg said the organization is not disengaging with providers such as Santa Cruz County Probation or mental health providers, and is in fact still relying on their referral expertise.

Looking out

In the rollout of a new campaign, large banners with bold typeface, buttons, T-shirts and bracelets around campus remind Homeless Service Center staff to ask, "How can we help YOU find housing?"

Brian Taylor, 55, said last week that he been staying at the Homeless Services Center's Recuperative Care Center for the previous 19 days. Taylor said he was recovering from a foot injury that,

if incorrectly tended to, might have led to the foot being amputated. What he needed was a temporary reprieve, he said.

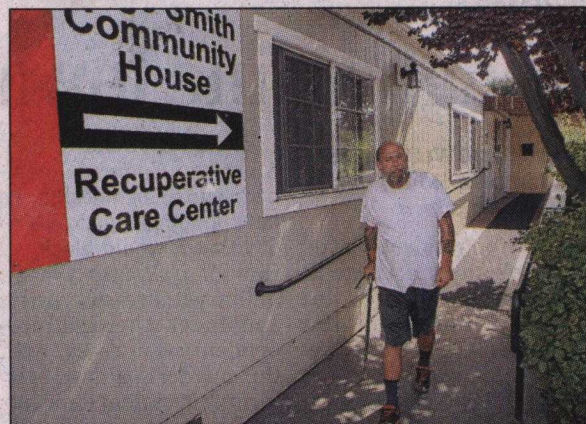
"It allows me to be able to heal at my own pace and get my bearings," Taylor said of the medical facility. "This is the only way I would be able to heal."

"Everybody's looking out for each other (on the Homeless Services Center campus)," Taylor said.

Purpose-driven

The Harvey West neighborhood campus, which houses four shelter programs and a medical recuperation site, was quiet on a recent weekday afternoon. The nearby Coral Street, historically thickly lined with cars that often included people who lived inside, has become permit-only parking in recent months.

Similarly, the installation of an enclosing security gate shortly after the 2015 cutbacks and walk-on meal program discontinu-



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Brian Taylor — a Santa Cruz resident since 1979 — is recuperating from leg surgery at the HSC's Recuperative Care Center, where the cost to house him is \$125 a day rather than \$1,200 a day at a hospital.

ation meant the Homeless Services Center has fewer "carrots" it can use to draw people in for services offered.

That is something Kramer said he has been working to change, with new on-campus "purpose-driven" activities.

The Santa Cruz County Board of Supervisors has continued to help fund the center's free mail pickup, and shower and bathroom facilities are offered for more than shelter residents. The center opened a new Resource Center four months ago, bringing case managers and clients together in a computer room to conduct job and housing searches. Three days a week, the campus hosts a housing workshop in a conference room converted from a poorly managed former locker bay, Kramer said.

Other meetings include Alcoholics Anonymous, Narcotics Anonymous, hospice grief counseling and more.

Not enough

The Paul Lee Loft caters to the city's most persistent need and is kept open largely through community donations, Kramer said. Its 50 beds, however, are not enough for Santa Cruz, he said.

Even with a campus-wide load of more than 200 guests nightly, the organization can only host a fraction of Santa Cruz Coun-

ty's estimated 1,483 homeless population. Santa Cruz ranked 10th nationally among small regions for largest number of homeless individuals in 2015. Statewide, it held the fourth largest per-capita population among 43 regions that same year.

The Homeless Services Center helps house about 10 to 14 clients a month, Kramer said.

"We're not keeping up with inflow," Kramer said. "There are still more new individuals and families becoming homeless than we're able to support and provide housing solutions for."

Community discussions around expanding emergency homeless shelter space have begun to gain momentum in the past six months.

When the Homeless Services Center stepped back for the first time in years from operating the annual winter shelter last year, it opened the door for some new players to take center stage. The Association of Faith Communities took over the winter shelter this past year, with the Homeless Services Center serving as its fiscal sponsor.

The traditional National Guard Armory in DeLaVeaga Park was traded in for new community partners, with temporary shelter sites set up at the Salvation Army in downtown Santa Cruz and the Veterans of Foreign Wars hall in Live Oak.

Need for new shelter

It has become clear to numerous groups that 200 beds is not enough to meet the need in Santa Cruz. Both the Association of Faith Communities and Salvation Army, among other partners, have had discussions with county Homeless Services Coordinator Rayne Marr about expanding shelter services.

"Conversations are ongoing among numerous stakeholders related to developing a permanent year-round shelter, but this is anticipated to be a multi-year effort to identify a location and sources of funding," Marr said.

Most recently, the Santa Cruz City Council approved a new Homeless Coordinating Committee report and set aside \$100,000 in its budget as a placeholder to begin work on a new shelter.

Former Santa Cruz Mayor Don Lane may have ended his political run in December, but has kept abreast of the latest issues surrounding homelessness and housing.

Lane, who serves as leadership council chairman for countywide stakeholder group, Smart Solutions to Homelessness, said he is optimistic about the latest shelter service expansion discussions, even if they may still require years to come to fruition.

"There's a whole group of people in the community who I think are poised to work on this," Lane said. "I think this is a moment where there's an opportunity to move forward."

The big questions will remain, where would a new shelter be located, how would it be funded and who would operate it, Lane said. With a countywide backing for a homelessness strategic work on the "All In: Toward a Home for Every County Resident" plan, a county-funded homeless coordinator Marr and the city of Santa Cruz's new homelessness plan, Lane said he has reason to believe the issue will get much-needed attention.