

Local

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Board takes steps toward housing for mentally ill

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Sometimes, what the mentally ill need most from society is a good home at an affordable price.

Santa Cruz County supervisors adopted a set of goals that commit the county to financing the construction of two housing projects a year for the next five years for the mentally ill.

"If we can't provide housing with dignity and affordability, then our treatment resources are wasted in Santa Cruz County," County Mental Health Director Rama Khalsa told the supervisors.

"We want to work with the community so that when family members do become ill and need supportive housing, we can keep them in this community."

One group offering a partial solution to mentally ill people's need for shelter is a San Jose group, Housing for Independent People. HIP was founded by parents who could not find decent

housing for their disabled adult sons and daughters.

The plan approved by supervisors yesterday endorses a contract with HIP to open two new housing projects a year (25 beds annually) for the next five years. Executive Director Al DiLudovico said HIP is proposing a \$54,000 contract with the county, and would purchase two residential hotels in Santa Cruz and one in Watsonville this year.

Affordable housing for the mentally ill is a scarce commodity today in Santa Cruz County and getting harder by the month to find.

Right now, a new survey estimates, there are 251 beds for the mentally ill in Santa Cruz County. Another 25 beds are in the "development" stage. The county needs, according to its own report, 582 beds this year and 640 by 1992.

"Without adequate food, clothing, shelter and basic security and stability in one's living environment, it is not

possible to effectively implement treatment and rehabilitation programs," a study on housing for the mentally said.

A lot of those beds might be used by street people. About 35 percent of the homeless participating in the Shelter Project this winter are classified as mentally ill.

Case managers spend a lot of time, sometimes fruitlessly, trying to get patients into suitable housing. It's expensive.

"For those lucky enough to find housing," the report says, "the cost is excessive."

The Housing Authority lists fair market rent for a one-bedroom apartment at \$641 a month and \$1,058 per month for a four-bedroom rental. A mentally ill person, unable to work and receiving only SSI payments of \$630 a month, can hardly afford to rent an unsubsidized one-bedroom apartment.

Yet, since the Oct. 17 earthquake, the vacancy rate is at or near zero. There

is a six-year wait for someone applying today to get into a subsidized rental unit in the county.

There is, however, some non-institutional housing targeted for the mentally ill available in the county. Stepping Out, a private non-profit contractor, has 73 beds. Ten are located at T-House, a transitional house where residents can stay for a maximum of one year, but usually only three to six months before moving on to a satellite apartment. Counseling, to help residents prepare for a more independent life style, is available for only 12 hours of each day at T-House.

Stepping Out also maintains 63 beds in nine apartments and houses in the county — most of which are rentals. Stepping Out guarantees rent payments and also promises to repair any damage caused by a resident.

"Although the arrangement tends to be a mutually good one, the majority of residents are paying rents approaching 50 percent of their income," the

housing report notes. "This is a good system, but it is at risk as the housing market inflates. Although some of the houses have been part of the system for eight years or more, the contracts are essentially month-to-month with no firm guarantees of the resource lasting more than that."

Residential care homes are the other main source of housing for the mentally ill. There are a total of 106 beds in the five board-and-care residences now serving individuals with mental illness. Several of the homes are for sale. Downtown Manor (47 beds out of 106) is for sale. Capitola Manor recently lost its license for eight beds and is not operating. Somera's (12 beds) was recently sold and is in danger of losing its operating license, the county report added.

"The total number of mental health board-and-care beds at risk is 59. This constitutes over 50 percent of the residential care home beds now available," it continued.