

Santa Cruz Cares

# Voucher Program Helps The Needy

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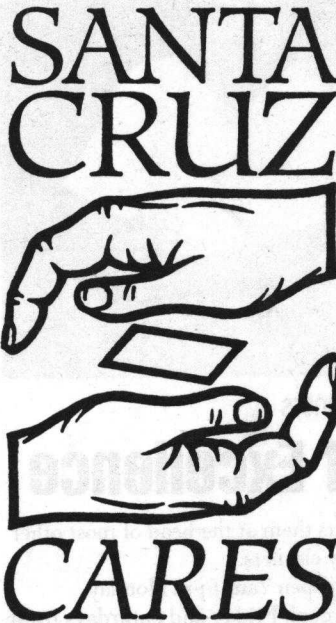
**F**or those familiar with Downtown Santa Cruz, panhandling is a problem. Although it is illegal, it can still essentially be carried out within the letter of the law. California Penal Code defines a panhandler as "every person who accosts another person in a public place or in any place open to the public for the purpose of begging or soliciting alms."

As Santa Cruz Police Department Sergeant Rick Selly points out, the key word is "accost". It is the conduct of any individual who goes about contacting others for handouts. It excluded those who sit or stand by the wayside soliciting charity.

The Santa Cruz District Attorney has decided that charges of panhandling will be prosecuted if the person asking for alms does so in a threatening, intimidating or coercive manner.

Santa Cruz Cares is a program we hope will have noteworthy, positive impact on downtown panhandling. The program aims to reduce the amount of cash on the streets obtained through panhandling while aiding local homeless service agencies.

Santa Cruz Cares reduces cash on the street by providing the public with an alternative to giving cash to panhandlers. The "voucher" system enables the public to buy a sheet of vouchers which can be given to panhandlers instead of



giving cash. Vouchers are not redeemable for prescription drugs, alcohol, or tobacco, so people who buy and distribute vouchers will not have to worry that their hard earned dollar is being used in a way they did not intend.

Besides helping the needy through distribution of vouchers, for every dollar contributed to the voucher program, 20 cents goes toward the five homeless services which provide food, shelter, physical health, mental health, and employment. So, if someone buys

vouchers but does not distribute them, they still have helped the needy.

We feel that once people realize that it makes more sense to buy and distribute vouchers as opposed to cash, vouchers will become the dominant medium of exchange for the truly needy. The panhandlers who are not really homeless or needy, but just want your spare change, will look for greener pastures, hence making our downtown area more comfortable for the public. A cleaner image of downtown Santa Cruz will benefit all downtown users.

We do not claim that Santa Cruz Cares will be the answer to panhandling, but it is without question a step in the right direction. With support from the downtown business community and a good amount of public education, we hope for a dramatic, positive impact.

Santa Cruz Cares vouchers can be purchased and donations can be made at participating businesses displaying the Santa Cruz Cares poster. The businesses are located primarily in the downtown and nearby areas. To date, voucher sellers include Bookshop Santa Cruz, Woolworth, Hobee's, Pontiac Grill, Metropolitan Market, the Metro, Atlantis Fantasyworld, Cotton Tales and the Locust Street Parking Garage.

—Vince Banaga, Santa Cruz Cares  
Project Coordinator