

Calling for help

Meals for homeless in jeopardy

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SANTA CRUZ — The cupboard is getting bare at the Free Meal kitchen, where more than 100,000 dinners have been served to homeless people over the last two years.

The meal program, located behind the River Street Shelter near the intersections of highways 1 and 9, is simply running out of money, said director Karen Gillette.

"I don't want to sound so gloom-and-doom," said Gillette, "but we have enough money right now get us through another two months, maybe." Two big liability insurance payments are looming, and they could be the program's death knell, she said.

The meal program is supported by city and county funds — about 30 percent of its \$45,000 yearly budget — plus grants from charities and federal agencies and individual donations.

A Free Meal volunteer, Gary Austin, 58, said "the lines here are

'We're getting \$2 checks from welfare mothers'

— Karen Gillette,
director of Free Meal

getting longer and the food shorter. We're completely out of tea, coffee. These people are hungry."

The food here served each evening is often the sole nourishment for hundreds of homeless people; more than 150 people eat there nightly, said Gillette. The site is also a gathering place for many of the county's homeless population, whose numbers are estimated as high as 3,000, according to a 1990 state survey.

Donations are running at about half of last year's level, and two

key grant applications were recently approved at 50 percent of the requested amount, Gillette said.

"Foundations provide seed money for the first year or two, and then they expect the community to take over," Gillette said.

"It's so frustrating. If everybody in Santa Cruz gave us a 25 cents, we could run for three years," said Gillette. "It seems like the poor are supporting the poor. We're getting \$2 checks from welfare mothers. Maybe it's the recession. ...

"I don't want it to sound like we're not grateful," said Gillette, "because we are. But last year our Christmas mailer brought in \$8,500 in private donations. This year, we got \$1,500. There were more checks, but for smaller amounts."

Rumors travel fast on the streets and clients of the program Thursday night were already worried that Free Meal might close.

"I get \$90 a month to live on from Social Security. I'm 75. What would I do?" asked Charlene Rags-

dale as she waited for a van to take her to a night's lodging as part of the Interfaith Satellite Shelter Program.

Mark Peterson, 27, a "houseless" Cabrillo College science major, said, "By the time 4 o'clock comes around I'm pretty hungry. I need to be able to eat to be able to think."

Peterson, who hopes to transfer to UC Santa Cruz next fall, said he'd "probably beg on the streets" if Free Meal closes. With tuition costs on the rise, "many students are going to find themselves with the choice of either eating or getting an education," he said.

Sean Wilkins, 28 and "homeless by choice," said he'd "rather not get into what I'd do if the meal closed down. There will be a lot more crime, a lot more people in the streets. If Santa Cruz thinks it has a problem now — shutting this program down is not going to make people go away."