

City funding questioned for homeless center

VICE MAYOR, ACTIVISTS CALL FOR GREATER SCRUTINY OF NONPROFIT PROGRAM



Cooks at the Homeless Services Center in Santa Cruz serve a free dinner Friday evening.

MATTHEW HINTZ/SENTINEL

Homeless - 2000
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✓ **SANTA CRUZ** — Three years ago, after a new director tightened security at Santa Cruz's Homeless Services Center and reinforced its mission of getting clients into permanent housing, longtime watchdogs of the city-supported organization were full of praise.

Now, as city leaders begin the process of determining how to spend \$1 million in annual social services funding, the outlook for the center is far less certain. The past year has renewed concerns about crime in and around the Coral Street property — which is owned by the city — and increased anxiety about exactly who is receiving shelter, meals, showers and mail at the facility underwritten by taxpayers and private donors.

The public got a brief glimpse at the brewing storm during last week's City Council meeting, when Vice Mayor Lynn Robinson

SEE HOMELESS ON A3



MATTHEW HINTZ/SENTINEL

Dianne P. Gordon sits in the parking lot of the Homeless Services Center in Santa Cruz Friday evening.

ON THE NET

To read the email Vice Mayor Lynn Robinson sent to Homeless Services Center Executive Director Monica Martinez and the email Councilman Don Lane wrote in response, visit www.santacruzsentinel.com and click on this story.

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CALLS FOR SERVICE

The Santa Cruz Police Department recorded the following numbers of calls for service for 115 Coral St., the location of the Homeless Services Center. The range is from March to March of each year.

2008-09: 330

2009-10: 491

2010-11: 653

2011-12: 672

2012-13: 727

SOURCE: Santa Cruz Police Department

HOMELESS

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suggested removing \$15,000 in funding — less than 10 percent of the annual support the center receives from the city — and applying it to an unrelated infrastructure project. The recommendation got no traction, but that doesn't mean there isn't high-level city support for closer scrutiny of the center.

Just after noon on Feb. 26, Robinson sent an email to Monica Martinez, the center's executive director, sharing concerns about security and operations of the county's largest homeless services program. After years of bird-dogging the center, Robinson essentially said, "I'm done."

Robinson told the Sentinel she will consider calling for the reduction or elimination of \$42,000 in city funding for the facility's day services and perhaps even question funding that underwrites related shelter programs.

"It's very apparent there are clients taking advantage of these services while they have criminal activity they are partaking in — I have personally observed it," Robinson said. "Anyone who spends time on Coral Street can tell you: The vehicles, the cast of characters that have been around there for years. I'm convinced the services are not working. That is not the kind of agency that is giving our community a good outcome."

Robinson is only one of seven council members who ultimately will make a funding decision affecting the Homeless Services Center and a host of other agencies applying for financial assistance.

But her voice carries particular weight because she serves on the Community Programs Committee that makes such funding recommendations to the full council and is in line to be the city's next mayor. As a co-founder of Santa Cruz Neighbors, she also has close connections to neighborhood groups, police, business owners and a growing network of public safety activists — one of which, Take Back Santa Cruz, supports cuts to the center and is mulling a public nuisance lawsuit.

"My intent is to be in the weeds," Robinson said. "We need to focus on city residents. The needs of families and the youth are my main

BUDGET SNAPSHOT

The city is a major funder of the Santa Cruz Homeless Services Center. Here is how the funding breaks down annually:

DAY ESSENTIAL SERVICES CENTER: \$42,000, or 6.9 percent of \$600,922 budget
PAGE SMITH COMMUNITY HOUSE: \$70,000, or 23 percent of \$304,521 budget
REBELE FAMILY SHELTER: \$45,000, or 9.6 percent of \$469,560 budget
PAUL LEE LOFT: \$27,000, or 8.3 percent of \$323,752 budget
TOTAL: \$184,000, or 10.8 percent of \$1,698,755

SOURCE: Homeless Services Center

focus."

Martinez, whom Robinson said she continues to have some faith in, insists the center is doing all it can to secure its facilities and be a good neighbor. She said staff patrol morning to night, remove and ban clients found with drugs, alcohol or weapons, and call police to report crimes.

"The Homeless Services Center is here to do anything we can to reduce homelessness in the community," Martinez said. "If the community is asking for something else or wants to try something else, we are really here to be responsive. But I haven't seen any evidence that cutting services for the most vulnerable does something to increase public safety."

PRESSURE MOUNTING

The City Council won't finalize Santa Cruz's budget until June or July. Robinson's fellow Community Programs Committee members, Mayor Hilary Bryant and Councilwoman Cynthia Mathews, say it's premature to know what level of funding they may recommend for the center.

But Mathews said, "I think it's fair to say I do share concerns about some aspects of security and operations" at the center.

Police and First Alarm security guards hired by the city regularly patrol the Harvey West industrial zone, where the center is located, to track drug use around the campus, as well as illegal camping and drug trafficking in nearby Pogonip park and the railroad tracks that bisect the area.

Police Chief Kevin Vogel said he believes Martinez is trying to address public safety, but he said he wants the center to expand an ID system for clients and is concerned about drug dealers who prey on them.

"We ought to have some way of knowing who these

people are," he said of day services clients.

The center has ID cards for shelter clients, including those who stayed at an emergency winter shelter this season and are often among the day services clientele. The center also subscribes to a countywide homeless management information system that tracks clients and their services.

But Martinez said there aren't enough resources to expand the ID system to people who are just receiving meals and taking showers. Those are the ones Robinson and other watchdogs are most concerned about because they can come and go each day without taking other steps to change their lifestyle.

Analicia Cube, a co-founder of Take Back Santa Cruz, has called for a gate across the center's main entrance, which Martinez isn't opposed to but says there is no funding. Take Back also wants First Alarm guards paid by the center stationed at the site and police officers to walk the campus with drug-sniffing dogs, Cube said.

Cube, who praised Martinez in 2010 for tackling security gaps, said she still believes in the director, but absent meaningful action by the center or the city, a number of citizens are prepared to file a lawsuit.

"The way to get someone to listen is financially and legally," Cube said. "Because (the center) is owned by the city and it funds them, the city is the one that is going to take the fall if there is a negligence lawsuit filed."

Mary Lou Goeke, executive director of the United Way of Santa Cruz County, urges patience.

"I think they have a very difficult job to do, and it's a very important job for everyone who lives here, not just for the clients they serve," she said. "If all parties can

calm down and get together and really look at these real problems, then let's work on real solutions."

A COMPLICATED PROBLEM

A number of factors complicate the city's relationship with the center.

Many may be surprised to learn the city owns the 60,000-square-foot property at 115 Coral St., having entered into a 55-year lease with the center in 2002. The rent is \$3,400 per month.

The center is governed by a number of special use permits issued by the city. Zoning Administrator Eric Marlatt said there have been no code enforcement complaints filed against the center.

This year, the center received \$184,000 in total city funding for the day services and three shelter programs, including federal funds granted to the city for community initiatives. The city money, which represents 11 percent of the center's total funding, is more than Santa Cruz provides any other social services agency.

The politics behind how to address the long-standing problem of homelessness also colors the center's profile in the community.

Once seen as a tolerant, progressive town with an equally liberal university, the tide has turned recently as business owners and city leaders have faced a deep recession and lingering perceptions that Santa Cruz coddles transients and ignores a rampant drug culture. Recent councils have pushed business vitality and public safety, and yet anxiety has reached new heights after an unrelenting wave of shocking crime.

The gang-related murders of two teenagers and an anarchist riot in 2009 and 2010 gave way to the shocking slaying of a downtown merchant 10 months ago by a mentally troubled felon who bunked at the Homeless Services Center. Anguish deepened in the city last month when two police officers were killed by a gunman with a lengthy criminal history.

Citizen groups routinely sound alarms about drug dens, campsites and discarded drug syringes — most recently on Tuesday, when dozens filled the Council Chamber to loudly tender complaints.

The city has increased support for police, busted up campsites and pressed county officials to better monitor

a needle exchange program. Going back several years, City Hall tightened rules on panhandling downtown and called for greater participation by the county and neighboring cities in the provision of social services.

And still, the Homeless Services Center often finds itself as a focal point — supporters might say scapegoat — in the debate over the causes of crime.

Since March 2008, police have received 2,873 calls for service at the Coral Street address, which also contains the nonprofit River Street Shelter and Homeless Persons Health Project. Information about the nature of those calls and who generated them was not immediately available, but it's clear their numbers have risen sharply. There were 330 calls for service from March 2008 to March 2009 and 727 for the same period in 2012-2013.

"They are creating calls for service that wouldn't be there if they weren't there," Chief Vogel said of the center. "Communities that don't have those types of services, don't have those types of problems."

Vice Mayor Robinson and Take Back Santa Cruz are also upset the center agreed to house up to 10 felons at a time who would have been sentenced to prison or supervised by parole before a California law shifted them to county monitoring in 2011. As part of a large network of agencies working with county probation officials in the AB 109 program, the center will receive up to \$90,000 in annual funding for providing shelter to probationers who qualify as nonviolent, non-serious and nonsexual and who are re-entering society homeless, unemployed and often addicted.

The city's planning director, Juliana Rebagliati, said the center's involvement in the AB 109 program is under review to determine if it conforms with the center's use permits.

Councilman Don Lane believes the center is trying to tackle the very problems on which the community is demanding action. Lane left the center's board recently to spend more time working on a larger regional movement addressing chronic homelessness.

"The Homeless Services Center is not the problem," said Lane, who on Saturday wrote an email to Robinson responding to her email to Martinez. "The problem is

we have an injection drug problem, a homelessness problem, and a mental health problem" and that the center is the "catch basin" for all of them.

Lane said he believes the council should absolutely determine the kinds of services it wants to fund. But the idea that just "reducing funding will make things better is a dubious assumption," he said.

CUTTING DAY SERVICES

If the city cuts funding for day services, director Martinez said she may recommend closing Saturdays and Sundays. She chose the weekend days because other services on campus are also closed at that time.

The day center offers breakfast and dinner, showers, mail and laundry services and a computer room. The campus is open from 7-10 a.m. without a requirement to access services, but from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. clients must use services in order to stay before dinner is served at 4 p.m. The campus closes at 7 p.m. and only shelter clients are allowed after that time. Security staff remains on site until 10 p.m.

Martinez isn't sure where people will go if day services are cancelled on weekends. She speculates they may congregate downtown, the San Lorenzo River levee or other sites where the city has long tried to reduce their impact and visibility.

Dan Conklin, 46, said he uses the free services nearly every day.

Conklin, who has been homeless on and off for 15 years, eats breakfast and dinner at the center, takes a shower, uses the phone and does his laundry.

He also seeks medical attention, when necessary, at the Homeless Persons Health Project.

Conklin says losing that help would leave him and others with no where to turn for basic necessities.

"Any cutbacks, I think, would be a bad thing," he said. "In my opinion, this place saves lives. It would be a shame."

Staff writer Shanna McCord contributed to this report. Follow Sentinel reporter J.M. Brown on Twitter at [Twitter.com/jmbrown-reports](https://twitter.com/jmbrown-reports)