

Patrolling 'outreach worker' OK'd

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In a new strategy that's being tried in a handful of California cities, Santa Cruz soon will have a full-time social worker patrolling Pacific Avenue to help street people, the mentally ill, drunks and truant teen-agers find their way off the street.

By a 6-0 vote Tuesday, the city council approved a pilot plan to hire an "outreach worker" who will walk the downtown business district 40 hours a week.

The social worker, who will be an em-

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ployee of the Santa Cruz County Mental Health Services Department, will have a two-way radio to keep in touch with police, a car for driving indigent people to

shelters or hospitals and a small office in the former Delmarette Fountain Cafe at 1126 Pacific Ave.

The move is the city's latest attempt to

address complaints about panhandling, vagrancy and intimidating behavior on Pacific Avenue.

“We have a number of people on Pacific Avenue who have psychiatric problems,” Mayor Scott Kennedy said. “With a town our size, two or three people can have an immediate impact.”

In fact, police estimate as many as half of the street people on Pacific Avenue suffer from mental problems, such as schizophrenia or manic depression, and have not

See **PILOT PLAN**, Page 2B

Social worker will patrol Pacific Avenue in pilot plan

SJMN JAN. 26, 1994

PILOT PLAN

from Page 1B

received proper treatment.

“This just makes good common sense,” Deputy Police Chief Jeff Locke said. “We do have our bums, but a significant number of people have a disability that is beyond their lifestyle choice.”

Similar “roving social workers” have been hired recently in San Francisco, Berkeley, Oakland and Santa Monica.

The Santa Cruz experiment will begin in March and run on a trial basis until June 1995. Total cost is \$73,360 — half from the city redevelopment department and half from the federal Medicaid program.

The idea originally was proposed by Rama Khalsa, director

of the county mental health services department.

“This isn't going to make Pacific Avenue look like Beaver Cleaver's neighborhood,” Khalsa said Tuesday. “But if there's a problem, we can do outreach.”

“Most folks don't want to get arrested or end up in the hospital. They need a better alternative.”

For example, the social worker could address different groups in the following ways, she said:

■ Mentally ill people could be driven to Dominican Hospital's crisis service center, other care facilities or their homes for medication. They also could be introduced to shelters, disability programs and county caseworkers.

■ Homeless people could be taken to the River Street Shelter, the Coral Street day facility or

other facilities where they would receive food and bedding without having to panhandle.

■ With drunks, Khalsa said: “You could approach them and say, ‘Gee, you're going to be arrested if you stay here; I'd be glad to take you home.’” Homeless people under the influence could be taken to shelters when sober or introduced to county 12-step programs.

■ And with truant teens, the social worker could call school officials or parents. Runaways would be referred to Child Protective Services. Others would be told about the Boys and Girls Club and other centers.

“I'm really happy to hear about it,” said Kevin Melrose, whose family owns property and two travel agencies downtown