

# Homeless Relocate Using Free Bus Tickets

## Donations Pay for Transportation, Rigorous Screening Process Limits Number of Participants

Homeless - 2000

by Kristen McLaughlin

In an effort to reunite homeless people with their families or improve the opportunities for an individual to better his or her circumstances, the Homeless Services Center (HSC) has been quietly providing free bus tickets to a limited number of people. Started in July 2006, transportation assistance has been funded through a private, anonymous donation. However, qualifying for the program involves a rigorous screening process.

Since its inception, the program has provided free Greyhound bus tickets to 23 people. The HSC is located on Coral Street near downtown Santa Cruz.

### Making a Positive Change

From the very beginning, the plan was not envisioned as a program where someone would just walk up for a ticket and get one. In fact, the anonymous donor stipulated that participants must first go through a review process, which includes demonstrating a connection to the destination community.

"It could be used strategically to assist homeless people to relocating to communities where they had a better chance of employment, housing or reconnecting with loved ones," said HSC Executive Director Ken Cole. "It was not envisioned to dump people out of Santa Cruz and into some other community."

Just the assistance of a bus ticket could truly motivate someone to make a positive change in their lives, Cole added.

"It is very exciting to have this kind of resource available, because when someone does have a plan, you hate to see a momentary lack of finances get in the way of making a change," he said.



### A Viable Relocation Plan

To qualify for transportation assistance, candidates should be able to demonstrate that they have been planning for a while, Cole said, either by working with a social service agency or some other person to assist in their goals. A certain number of the tickets have been given to participants in the Homeless Persons Health Project, whose professional counselors make referrals to the program.

"We are not soliciting people to come up to our door and ask for bus tickets," Cole said. "If someone asks for assistance, we screen heavily to make sure they have a plan that is viable, and ask for verification (over the telephone) from someone in the community they are moving to. We would expect it was not just an impulsive act."

Travel is restricted to Greyhound Bus Lines, where HSC has a local account, and the

local office has been cooperative in handling the paperwork, Cole noted.

### Providing Continuity

So far, the program has expended \$2,400 of the \$5,000 gift, according to Cole.

"At the pace we are going, we think we have enough to help people in this manner through June of this year," Cole said.

And more donations are on the way. The original donor has expressed an interest in replenishing the fund, and another private donor has contributed an additional \$500, according to Cole.

"We expect we will have this resource for a while," he said.

The program also has continuing benefits, as each departure helps the HSC by creating new openings in its system.

"It is also helpful to free up resources," Cole said.

Generally, most people have gone to other parts of California, including Los Angeles, San Diego, Merced and Sacramento, along with a few who traveled to the Seattle area in Washington.

"The farthest one was a town in northern Florida, so it is just scattershot random," Cole said. "It depends where people have connections, family or an opportunity to start over."

Transportation assistance for the homeless is not a new idea, Cole noted. An organization called Travelers Aid is the oldest, non-sectarian, social welfare organization in the United States, and is considered a prototype for assisting individuals and families who are temporarily stranded in a community. ■

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