

# Homelessness spread in 2013, fostering debate

Homeless - 2000

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SHMUEL THALER/SENTINEL FILE

Two homeless men bask in the warmth of afternoon sunlight in San Lorenzo Park on Dec. 9 as they prepared to spend the night in frigid temperatures. The count of homeless people in Santa Cruz County surpassed 3,500 this year.

More than 3,500  
locals have no place  
to call home

By JASON HOPPIN

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From anti-panhandling rules to protests over the city's no-camping laws, homelessness has always been a hot topic in Santa Cruz.

In 2013, it caught fire.

The ever-present problem grew at an alarming rate this year, with the population spiking 28 percent since the last biennial homeless census. The news affirmed the concerns of critics who fear the numbers are getting out of hand, while

adding to the burdens of officials already freighted with trying to find a way out of the crisis despite having few tools to do so.

"Even though the economy is showing an improvement, our clients, the people that we see, they're still underemployed," said Kimberly Ferm, executive director of the Pajaro Valley Family Shelter, which has an emergency shelter for 30 people and 15 units of transitional housing. "They're not able to save enough money (to find permanent housing)."

There were 3,536 homeless people in the Santa Cruz County, according to a biennial count

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SHMUEL THALER/SENTINEL FILE

A homeless woman sorts her belongings on the steps of the County Courthouse on Dec. 9 after spending an icy night outside.



# HOMELESS

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— 2,900 of whom slept on the streets. The city of Santa Cruz has always been the focus of the debate, and nearly one in three unsheltered homeless live in Santa Cruz — a fact that surprises few.

But 2013 was the year in which the problem crept further in the neighborhoods across the county. With a third saying they're homeless because they lost a job, the ranks swelled from San Lorenzo Valley to Soquel. One in four called Live Oak or East Cliff Drive home, while one in six lived in Watsonville, where 20 percent were caring for at least one child.

While the economy has picked up, Ferm said families who go through her program — which includes job placement, life skills training and even a requirement to begin saving money — still have trouble finding a place to live in a tight and expensive housing market.

“One of the gaps that we have is inventory of housing,” Ferm said.

Santa Cruz County also has not shared in the jobs boom hitting the rest of the Bay Area, and recent federal

numbers on wages actually show negative growth here, ranking the county as one of the worst in the nation.

All of which feeds a problem that local governments and social service providers seem under-equipped to handle. While there is a perception that homeless persons come here for services, the funding available for those services is woeful.

The county receives about \$1.7 million annually in Housing and Urban Development grants to care for homeless persons. At \$490, its per capita federal funding grant is the 27th lowest in the country, out of more than 400 regional awards.

That's due to a formula that favors local population and other factors over the actual number of homeless persons. For example, the Wilkes-Barre, Penn. region received \$3.5 million in 2012 to care for its 165 homeless persons — more than \$21,000 each.

When it comes to taxpayer dollars, local governments tilt more toward the provision of social services rather than, for example, underwriting private development. But 2013 made clear that they just don't have the resources to meet the scale of the problem — the county is 12th worst in the nation at sheltering homeless per-

sons.

Santa Cruz Vice Mayor Don Lane said he wants to see if the federal formula can be changed, and has made initial overtures to HUD and Rep. Sam Farr, D-Carmel.

“It's going to be a long, uphill struggle, but it's worth starting the conversation because it's going to be part of the solution in Santa Cruz County,” Lane said.

There are some victories.

The 180/180 Program recently housed its 120th client, helping keep chronically homeless persons off the street. And a new recuperative care center opened this month at the Homeless Services Center, keeping homeless persons out of pricey hospital beds, which helps minimize the cost to taxpayers.

“I sort of see a good trend toward people thinking about what works,” Lane said. “And there's not just one single thing that works, but there's a variety of programs that will work if we kind of embrace them and move them along.”

Nearly three in 10 local homeless persons sleep in cars, a sign they are newly homeless and reinforcing that the problem is on an upward trend. But a large homeless population downtown and along the San Lorenzo River levee — many with substance abuse or

mental health problems, or both — has made it harder for fed-up locals to sympathize with the problem.

Santa Cruz Mayor Lynn Robinson said she wants to see social services agencies do a better job of tracking homeless persons and assuring that services provided are helping get people off the street. Other communities are doing that, and Santa Cruz should as well, she said.

“Santa Cruz has a lot of room for improvement in that arena,” Robinson said. “I've been talking about it and other people have been talking about it. That's the partnership I plan on having with the county.”

In a town famous for its tolerance, there is an undeniable undercurrent of frustration. With a 10-year plan to end homelessness expiring — the number has actually gone up since it was adopted in 2003 — local officials are now looking at what the next plan should look like.

“I hope by the end of next year, we're going to have a plan that is really informed by the members of the community, not just by experts,” Lane said. “Though we need experts, too.”

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