

GIVING JOBS TO THE HOMELESS

Downtown Streets Team to offer vouchers, job training skills



DAN COYRO — SANTA CRUZ SENTINEL

Chris Richardson and Greg Pensinger head the Downtown Streets Team offering food vouchers and job skills training to homeless in exchange for community volunteer work. Chip, from the Downtown Association, was instrumental in bringing the program to Santa Cruz.

By Jessica A. York

jyork@santacruzsentinel.com
@ReporterJess on Twitter

SANTA CRUZ » Change is coming for Santa Cruz's downtown homeless population, who will be given an alternative to panhandling on Pacific Avenue: beautifying the city in exchange for food and other vouchers.

By the end of the month, the new Santa Cruz Downtown Streets Team will give homeless people both a uniform — a yellow t-shirt — and an opportunity: job training and development.

The Silicon Valley-based nonprofit will begin recruiting the

city's neediest as volunteers for projects such as trash removal or even doing homeless outreach, all the while offering larger work experience opportunities. Though organizers are still working out the details, early areas of focus may include areas such as the Riverwalk, and downtown core.

The effort is not the "be-all-end-all of solutions to homelessness," said Downtown Streets Team Chief Program Officer Chris Richardson, but it begins to bridge the gap. The community beautifying work, however, though perhaps highly valued in the community, will be secondary to the organization's pri-

mary goals, he said.

The program will begin with offering participants a "meaningful daily activity" of joining the team on its daily outings, Richardson said. Through such efforts and community interactions, they can plug in to society, without the spectre of micromanagement or hard labor, he said. At the same time, team members are connected with case management and employment services.

The Downtown Streets Team quietly kicked off this month, a \$360,000 program in its first year primarily funded by the city of Santa Cruz, with a large donation raised

DOWNTOWN STREETS TEAM

What: Nonprofit Bay Area job experience program.

Where: Eight Bay Area communities, including Santa Cruz.

Who: Aimed at assisting the homeless.

Why: Restoring dignity, inspiring hope and offering pathway out of homelessness.

Information: streetsteam.org/santacruz.

Contact: Project Manager Greg Pensinger: greg@streetsteam.org.

by the Downtown Association's Executive Director Chip.

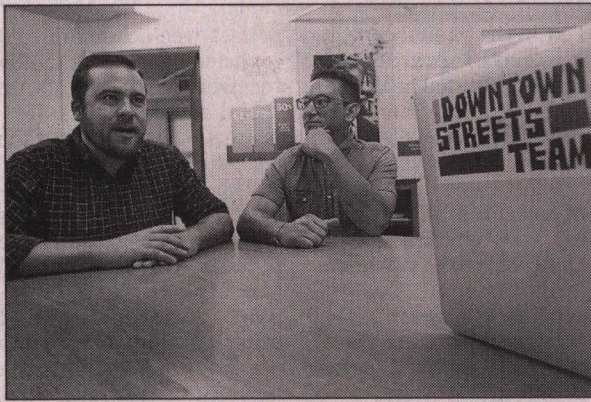
HOMELESS » PAGE 5

Homeless

FROM PAGE 1

The 12-year-old organization has teams established in Palo Alto, San Jose, Sunnyvale, San Rafael, San Francisco, Hayward and Novato. In those communities, an average 75 percent of graduated Downtown Streets Team members who move on to jobs remain employed after the first 90 days, officials said.

"You can say, 'I'm a volunteer with DST.' And people say that with pride, all the time, every single day, and it gives them that place in community," said the Downtown Streets Team's Santa Cruz project manager, Greg Pensinger. "I think that's a huge aspect that's hard to quantify — that feeling of connectedness or reconnectedness with a community, that really comes as a benefit of our program. Having someone thank them on



DAN COYRO — SANTA CRUZ SENTINEL

Chris Richardson and Greg Pensinger head the Downtown Streets Team, offering food vouchers and job skills training to homeless in exchange for community volunteer work.

the street is a huge aspect of our program, because it really builds confidence in our folks."

Instead of getting a paycheck, Downtown Streets Team workers receive weekly "stipends," often gift cards or vouchers for needed services and products, such as for such as for clothing, shelter, food and transportation passes. Though there

are few requirements for entry into the program, participants are held accountable for their actions, program leaders said.

The stipends have often served in other communities as the "carrot" to get area people experiencing homelessness in the door, but a larger goal of the Downtown Streets Team is to motivate participants

beyond immediate material goods, Richardson said. Ideally, team members begin to motivate each other, he said.

Mandatory weekly team member meetings will be hosted by The 418 Project, a nonprofit "movement arts center" at 418 Front St.

"The team meeting is kind of the be-all, end-all, our secondary recruitment tool after our team members doing it peer-to-peer," Richardson said. "Our members come to the meeting and check it out, and it's not going to be for them — especially early on, we're going to have a lot of folks check it out. Maybe it's too cheesy, too campy at first. And they're not ready to join this type of community."

Working out of shared office space with fellow city-county program the Bob Lee Community Partnership for Accountability, Connection and Treatment, at 740 Front St., the Santa Cruz arm of the growing Downtown Streets Pro-

gram nonprofit will employ Pensinger, housing specialist Brooke Newman and a case worker. The downtown team itself will consist of 25 volunteers at a time who are invited to participate for as long as about a year, though the program is flexible based on members' progress.

Newman, the chairwoman of the city's Commission for the Prevention of Violence Against Women, and until recently serving as interim executive director for the BirchBark Foundation, will take on the program's employment assistance efforts. She recently attended one of San Jose's Downtown Streets Team's weekly meetings.

"I'd never seen such enthusiasm and sense of self-confidence in people that are so disenfranchised. It was very powerful," Newman said. "In this model, it's an opportunity for personal responsibility, developing your own life."