

New homeless policies pushed

Homeless - 2000

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AT A GLANCE

- Require the Homeless Services Center to maintain an ID card, registry system.
- Designate a police officer to meet regularly with the center.
- Ban new homeless facilities in the city.
- Provide bus tickets for homeless people to communities where they have support.
- Ask sheriff to return jail inmates to their 'community of origin' upon release.

BROADWAY HOMICIDE: In wake of slaying, council trio proposes sweeping changes

By J.M. BROWN

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SANTA CRUZ — A trio of City Council members joined the Homeless Services Center director Wednesday in announcing a raft of proposals designed to improve security at the facility and trigger an overall cultural shift in how the city

deals with homelessness.

The measures, some of which were already in motion before Wednesday, are in direct response to the May 7 stabbing death of downtown merchant Shannon Collins. Convicted felon Charles Anthony Edwards III, who stayed four nights at the center before the crime, is charged with her murder.

The proposal includes tying city funding for the center to the creation of an identification registry for clients and rules that place a priority on serving local people. The plan also calls for no new homeless services facilities in the city and an expectation that other jurisdictions would work

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harder to address what they say is a countywide problem.

Because some of the steps put forward by Vice Mayor Hilary Bryant and council members Ryan Coonerty and Lynn Robinson involve city policy and spending priorities, they will require a vote by the full council. Some measures involve greater cooperation with county and court officials.

"None of these proposals in and of themselves would have stopped Charles Edwards, but if adopted, these approaches will bring more accountability and targeted resources to the challenges facing our community," the council members said in a statement.

THE IMPETUS

Collins, 38, was walking on Broadway around noon when authorities say Edwards, whose last known address was in San Francisco, stabbed her multiple times. Edwards, whose previous convictions involve assault and battery, has yet to enter a plea.

Coonerty said the proposal was crafted in recent days after meetings with Homeless Services Center Director Monica Martinez, as well as police, county health services and groups such as Take Back Santa Cruz. Other council members could not sign on to the plan because California's Brown Act bars a majority of members from agreeing to take action outside public view.

"When the incident happened there was just a sense that we had to do something," Coonerty said. "The motivation behind all this right now is that in Santa Cruz, our infrastructure is overwhelmed — from the police side and community programs side."

A focus on serving local clients reflects the community's desire, he said.

"We are a small town in a small county and our systems are running at capacity trying to solve a national problem," Coonerty said.

Mayor Don Lane, a Homeless Services Center board member who has made ending homelessness a cornerstone of his mayoral term, said the proposals overall are good. But he is concerned about suggesting the city require a client identification system for the center to receive city money, which at \$184,000 last year represented the largest share of social services funding.

"If for some reason the Homeless Services Center was not cooperating, then maybe the council needs to put in restrictions," he said. "But if the Homeless Services Center is agreeable to doing it, doesn't it seem unnecessary to implement it in that form now?"

Martinez, whom the city credits with improving security at the Coral Street facility since taking over in 2010, said increasing accountability is critical but won't solve the underlying issue of homelessness. She said the center remains focused on getting people out of a chronic cycle of emergency shelter.

"While these recommendations will hopefully solve some of the problems our community is facing, it's really important that we try real evidence-based solutions" such as increasing permanent housing in the area, she said.

KNOWING WHO IS THERE

The Homeless Services Center already conducts intake interviews for people requesting shelter, including one with the accused killer, who told center staff he wanted to connect with a Christian community as part of his 30-day goals. The shelter where he stayed has a 30-day limit.

The center also started an identification card program nine months ago.

Three hundred clients have cards that track services, but the cards are only mandatory for clients receiving mail at the center. Martinez said she would like to expand that requirement to people requesting shelter and add photos to the cards when funding allows.

The city wants police to be able to access the client registry, a move that requires expanding a city ordinance.

Coonerty said it makes sense to expand the Police Department's existing ability to review motel guest logs to include the Homeless Services Center. The proposal also calls for police to meet more regularly with the center to identify clients who might be committing crimes.

Police Chief Kevin Vogel doesn't take the proposal to mean his officers will sweep the registry at whim to see if anyone is wanted. But they could check to see if a person suspected of a crime is staying there.

"I don't see it working any differently than at the hotels and motels," he said. "We understand that people have the right to privacy. We don't use those records to go on a fishing expedition."

The center does not have the resources to conduct criminal back-

ground checks. And Vogel said police are limited in what they can share with the center about the background of anyone requesting shelter.

Mayor Lane cautioned against any security measures that might block clients just because of a criminal past.

"There are people who have a history of being in jail; that's part of why they are homeless," he said. "If a person with a criminal record isn't allowed to get services, they are going to remain on the street, not where we can engage with them and get them into a better place."

SHARING THE WORK

The trio of council members said they will not support the creation of any new homeless services facilities, adding that "other jurisdictions in Santa Cruz County need to share equally in the costs and location of social services."

Coonerty said the homeless shelters, Emeline Avenue health clinic and County Jail have concentrated the problem of homelessness in Santa Cruz.

"That has an impact on the community and a belief that we need to spread those impacts across the entire county, both in terms of cost and location," he said.

Officials estimate there are 2,700 homeless in the county.

John Leopold, chair of the county Board of Supervisors, said, "We understand the city, as the county seat, has its share of responsibilities. We're looking to shoulder our fair share of those responsibilities."

He said the county is considering restarting a program that provided a mental health treatment system within the jail and would support the Sheriff's Office looking into how to return people to the communities where they are from or committed a crime. He also said the county is committed to pursuing more affordable housing.

The city pays \$75,000 to support a mental health outreach worker downtown, but its redevelopment funding source went away. Coonerty said the city and county are trying to figure out how to expand the outreach program, not just keep it going.

Councilwoman Katherine Beiers, a Homeless Services Center board member, said she supports many of the recommendations, but would be reluctant to back a city policy banning new facilities in town to serve the homeless.

"I would not want to say that the city has enough and let someone else take care of it," she said, adding that money drives the ability to offer

services. "I sure would like the feds and the state to be doing all this and they're not. We can't turn our backs on the people that need our help."

JAIL AND COURT CHANGES

The city will ask the County Jail to return inmates where they committed their crime or the place they consider home, but it's not a proposal the Sheriff's Office has resources to undertake.

"We've been asking for that for a long time, and haven't had a lot of success," Coonerty said.

Sheriff Phil Wowak said he "applauds the city for trying to address the public's concern," and he is willing to discuss options for getting inmates from other areas out of Santa Cruz when they are released.

He said he appreciates the idea of people returning to their original communities to start making their lives better, "but I don't have the resources or the staffing model or the funding stream to do what they want to do."

He noted that inmates, barring any protective orders, are free to go wherever they like. Even if they do want to go to another community, Wowak asked, "Is it the Santa Cruz County taxpayers' responsibility to do that?"

Part of the solution could be an expanded bus pass program.

Building on a model in San Francisco, the city wants to expand a 5-year-old program that offers bus tickets to homeless people who came to Santa Cruz from out of town. The Homeless Services Center spent \$5,000 on the program last year, and only 5 percent of those who were given a bus ticket out of Santa Cruz are known to have later returned, Martinez said.

The difficulty is making sure "there is someone on the other end, family or a job opportunity" so the person doesn't end up homeless again.

The city also is asking the Superior Court to provide a monthly list of people who fail to appear so the city can prosecute them under a rule that allows for repeat offenders to be face higher level charges.

"The court fully supports the sharing of information between justice system and community partners and clearly recognizes this issue as an important community concern," Alex Calvo, executive officer of the court, said in a statement. "We are looking closely at the city's request and reviewing our information systems and procedures to determine how best to contribute to this process."

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SHERIFF PHIL WOWAK, on proposal to send jail inmates back to county of origin

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SANTA CRUZ POLICE CHIEF KEVIN VOGEL, on proposal for registry system at shelters

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COUNTY SUPERVISOR JOHN LEOPOLD