

HOMELESS Stricter supervision of mentally ill called for

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SANTA CRUZ — The American Psychiatric Association says states should make it easier for authorities to commit mentally ill people living on the streets. Authorities here agree.

Police Chief Jack Bassett flashed both thumbs up when he heard of the report, a summary of which was published in today's Journal of American Medical Association.

A study of street people by Santa Cruz city and UCSC last year reported "a significant segment of the street people population have psychological and mental problems."

The psychiatric association study published today says that up to 40 percent of the people living on streets across America suffer from

major mental illnesses such as schizophrenia and depression.

The association calls the plight of the homeless mentally ill "one of the greatest problems of present-day society."

The report notes a spectrum of state laws providing for involuntary commitment. California is among the strictest.

In California, according to Peter Spofford, research analyst for county Mental Health Services, a person must meet one of three criteria: He or she must be a danger to himself, a danger to someone else or gravely disabled to the extent that he or she cannot provide for food, clothing and shelter.

The association report calls for all states to adopt the least restrictive standards. The least restrictive laws are in Alaska, Texas and Washington, which extend the definition of

gravely disabled to include people who may have such problems in the future.

The Santa Cruz study pointed out that because of California's strict law, "police are often called upon to deal with aberrant individuals, but find themselves in a dilemma since there is no clear danger to the person involved or to the public."

That study called for the city and county to "establish a means by which people on the streets with psychological problems can get help."

Today's article in the Journal of American Medical Association, the Santa Cruz study and a recent state study all point the finger at the movement in the 1960s toward providing care and treatment away from state hospitals in less restrictive settings.

In California, the number of state

hospital beds fell from 37,000 in 1960 to 5,000 in 1983. And of that latest figure, half were occupied by patients on criminal commitments.

Acute care in Santa Cruz is provided on a contract basis by Dominican Hospital. There are 30 beds in the Dominican mental health unit.

Persons with long-term needs are either sent to Napa State Hospital or to a locked nursing facility in the local region.

In the 1960s, more thought was given to releasing mental patients than equipping the local communities to take care of them.

"Nobody likes the word 'warehousing,'" says Chief Bassett. "But it irks me that people are set out into the community to take their medication without supervision. The fact that they need the medication would indicate to me that they need super-

vision. All of the responsibility is placed on the person who needs the help."

Police don't view the mentally ill on the street as criminals.

"They're walking victims," says Bassett. Raul Lopez was a prime example, says Bassett.

Lopez was part of the "local color" on the Pacific Garden Mall for a number of years. He would stand partway in the street and stare at the sun all afternoon as a jazz band played at the Cooper House nearby.

Periodically officers would pick Lopez up and he would get treatment so he could last another few months out on the street. That street life came to an end in April 1984, when he was thrown off the footbridge across the San Lorenzo River after being robbed by two other street people.