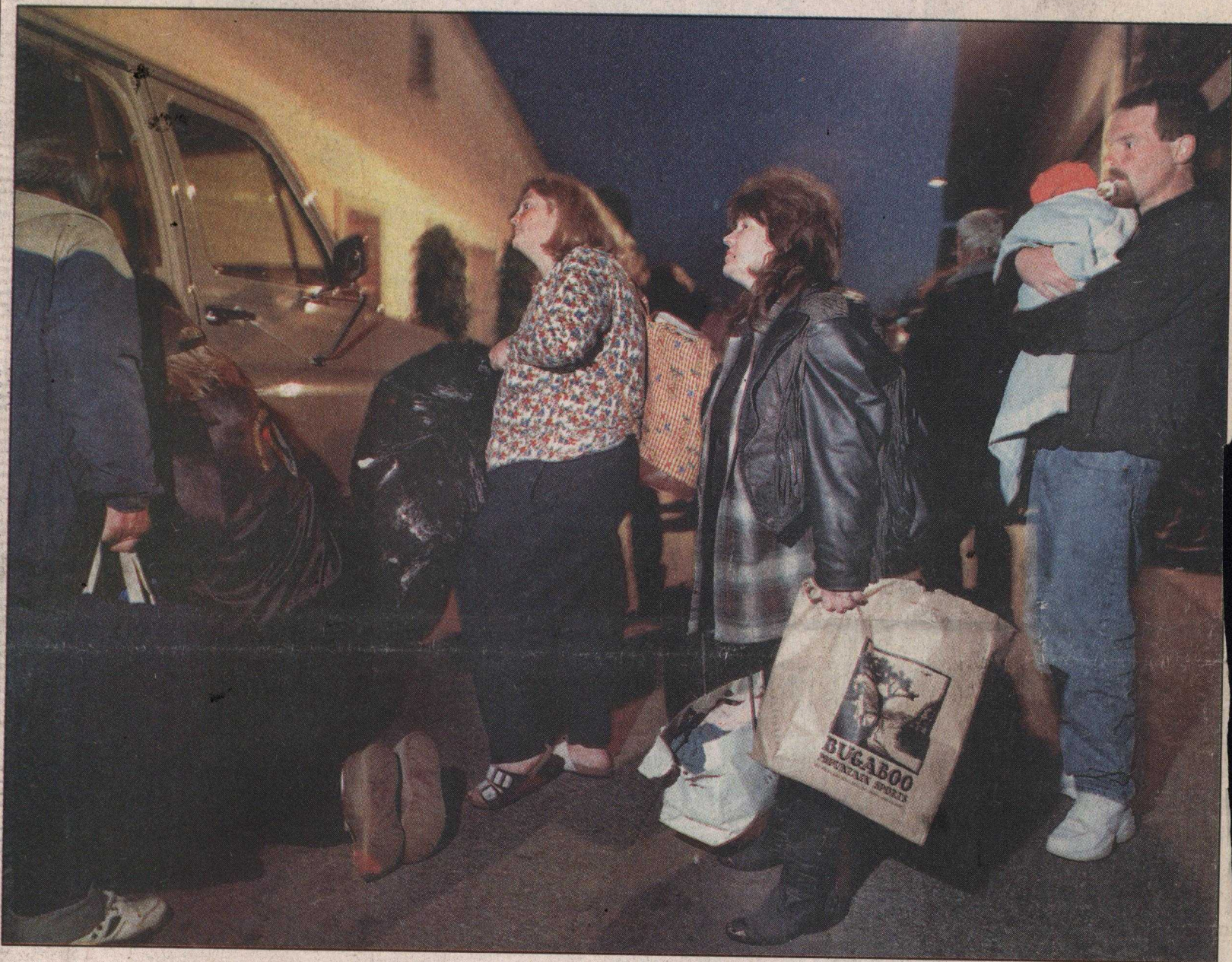


A QUESTION OF SPACE

Winter months weigh heavily on local homeless



Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel photos

Clients line up at the Homeless Community Resource Center for transportation to a shelter for the night.



Pam Lee, who is disabled, faces life on the street when the money for her apartment runs out next week. The single mother's children have been staying with friends since she was evicted from her home in late October.

Debate over camping ordinance brings homelessness to the fore

By DARREL W. COLE
Sentinel staff writer

SANTA CRUZ — As elected officials debate whether to soften the city's controversial camping ordinance, the homeless and their advocates say the issue really is about space.

Some say homeless families aren't being served because they don't want to spend nights in cramped shelters sleeping on floors tight up against other homeless people. But others who serve the homeless say there is enough room in shelters to meet the needs of the city's homeless during the cold winter months.

Either way, there is widespread agreement that shelters are no substitute for a home and that the shelters just don't work

for everyone.

Pam Lee, 37, is a single mother who was evicted from her home Oct. 30. She has since lived in hotels and spent one "horrible" week at the River Street shelter.

She has a teen-age daughter and son, and said she can't subject them or herself to the sub-standard conditions at local shelters. Lee, who is disabled, has until Dec. 16 to find an acceptable place. That's when the rent runs out on her room at the Islander Motel on Ocean Street.

Her children live with friends for now and she has no immediate family to rely on. She qualifies for help with housing costs, but the waiting list for subsidized housing in Santa Cruz County is 10,000 people long,

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'A lot of misperception' about camping ban

By **DARREL W. COLE**
Sentinel staff writer

SANTA CRUZ — Police gave out an average of 18 camping ordinance citations each month in the year ending Oct. 31, according to police statistics.

In that period, police received 754 complaints, resulting in 225 citations. In the process, 22 people were taken to jail.

"I think there's a lot of misperception out there," said Police Chief Steve Belcher. "The issues we deal with when we cite people have nothing to do with sleeping issues. It mostly has to do with degradation of the environment, issues such as waste, behavioral issues or litter-

ing."

Belcher said he will present a more formal report on the department's handling of the homeless at a future City Council meeting.

Like his officers, Belcher said he hears many complaints about his department's enforcement of the sleeping sections of the camping ordinance. It prohibits people from sleeping in public areas and from setting up bedding.

Last week the council hoped to soften the controversial sleeping sections of the ordinance by passing eight directives, all aimed at lessening the impact on the homeless.

One of the directives unanimously

passed by the council was that the police should issue warnings rather than citations "whenever reasonable and practicable." The council also directed police to continue responding to resident complaints.

"What the council has asked is that we, unless it's a citizen complaint, give warnings ... and we do that anyway," Belcher said.

The real test of the camping ordinance will come from a three-member committee of Mayor Katherine Beiers, Vice Mayor Keith Sugar and Councilman Christopher Krohn. They will meet several times over the next few months with residents, business owners, homeless-service

providers and others and return to the full council with recommended changes.

Belcher said his officers are sworn to uphold the law and to be responsive to the public.

"People have to realize these are not police issues, these are laws on the books and you just can't tell them (officers) not to do it," he said. "If you say you couldn't enforce them, then you might not take it all off the books. Otherwise, it puts the officer in too tough a position."

Of the 22 people actually arrested and put in jail after a camping violation complaint, nine were wanted for prior warrants and seven were also suspected of being drunk.

Homeless

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the Housing Authority says.

"I couldn't stay at River Street," Lee said seated on her hotel bed, surrounded by phone books and real estate listings from newspapers. "I got stuff stolen and there was a guy sitting 5 feet away who started smoking a crack pipe. I got out of there quick."

Lee's plight isn't all that uncommon. Of the county's 6,459 persons at poverty level, 4,500 are children with a single-parent mother, according to a 1998 United Way study. Many of these people are one bad break away from homelessness.

In a random survey of county residents, 6.6 percent reported they had been homeless at least once in the past five years, according to the United Way.

"Homelessness happens to nice people all the time," said Karen Gillette, executive director of the Homeless Services Center. "There are more people like (Lee) out there, but we just don't hear about them most of the time."

Through October, Gillette's center had served 458 over the past year, finding jobs for 263 of them. She said there are too many people teetering on the edge of homelessness. They include the disabled — physically or mentally.

"We get a lot who have fallen through the cracks somehow, with no family there for them because of some mistake or not knowing how to get help," Gillette said. "Like this 72-year-old woman who lost her husband and has no family, or the tree trimmer who fell out of a tree, broke a leg and didn't understand the system well enough and becomes homeless."

Gillette said the 428 winter-time "beds" available for the homeless in Santa Cruz meet the demands of most because not all homeless want to be in a shelter.

Shelter is provided at a variety of places, from the resource center, National Guard armory and some churches.

No one is turned away, Gillette said, though there are plenty of homeless living outdoors or in vehicles.

"The shelter services are generally adequate in the winter but no, they wouldn't be if every homeless person wanted to get shelter," she said. "But there's any number of reasons they don't seek it, including they have a pet, they want to stay in their vehicles, mental health problems or they just don't want help."

A recent City Council mission statement says the lack of adequate emergency, transitional and permanent shelters amounts to a "genuine crisis."

Paul Brindel, shelter project director for the Community Action Board, the county's anti-poverty agency, said there may be enough sleeping spaces for those in immediate need, but there isn't enough for families who have children and won't set foot in emergency shelters.

"What we've found is that families with children are the fastest growing numbers of homeless," Brindel said. "Shelters were not designed for families."

Brindel estimates the number of homeless in the county at 3,000 to 3,500. He guesses about a quarter of them have jobs and that most of them are on the streets only temporarily.

Homelessness in Santa Cruz has been in the spotlight in recent months — since the new majority on the City Council promised to revisit the city's camping ordinance. The ordinance, enacted in 1978 as part of a crackdown on the homeless, makes it illegal to sleep on public property or carry bedding in public.

Last week, the council passed eight resolutions to reduce the impact of the ordinance's sleeping sections. One resolution was a declaration that sleeping is a basic human right. The council also directed police to start warning violators rather than citing them.

The camping ordinance was intended to balance the needs of the homeless and business owners, who contend the behavior of some homeless people drives customers away.

Though the proposal to relax the ordinance is meant to help the homeless, some homeless advocates argue the council isn't going far enough.

Brindel said the camping ordinance should be stricken

HOMELESSNESS

■ The Homeless Community Resource Center found full- or part-time jobs for 263 of 458 people enrolled this year through October.

■ About 80 percent of clients using homeless services in the city are from outside Santa Cruz, including 35 percent from San Lorenzo Valley and 22 percent from outside the county.

■ The county homeless population is 3,000 to 3,500.

■ The city homeless population is estimated at 1,500.

■ In 1998, a United Way county survey indicated that 6.6 percent of people had been homeless in the past five years.

Source: Homeless Resources Community Center, United Way, city of Santa Cruz.

until there is adequate shelter space.

The state of homelessness in and around the city has changed much as far as numbers over the past five years, according to most. The number of homeless in the city is believed to have remained fairly steady — somewhere between 500 and 1,500.

But the profile of a homeless person has changed. "Before, most homeless in Santa Cruz were disabled and those sorts, and now it's a lot of disabled," said activist David Silva.

Gillette agreed.

"The homeless then had more to do with Santa Cruz being a counterculture place. I think maybe 70 years back then choose the lifestyle where now it's closer to 15 percent."

At her hotel room, Lee generally remained quiet when talking about her plight but cried when asked about her children.

"This is the first time we've been separated," she said. "I feel like such a failure as a mother, afraid of losing them. I want to look my kids in the eye and say, 'Merry Christmas, we have a home.'"