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Wayne Moore receives the 'Surviving Homelessness, Succeeding in Life' award from Paul O'Brien, a consultant to the Homeless Action Partnership at the Pajaro Valley Shelter Services in Watsonville on Tuesday.

County homeless population drops nearly 20 percent

Watsonville bucks declining trend

By DONNA JONES

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WATSONVILLE — Despite the ailing economy and foreclosure crisis, homelessness has declined substantially in Santa Cruz County since 2007.

That's with the exception of Watsonville, where the homeless population is about half that in Santa Cruz but rising, according to a survey released Tuesday.

The 2009 Santa Cruz County Homeless Census and Survey, the product of a head count in January and follow-up interviews with 401 homeless people, also found more of the county's homeless are living in shelters than in 2007.

"Everyone was looking for homeless data to reinforce homelessness as a by-product of the recession and housing crisis," said Peter Connery, vice president of Applied Survey Research, which produced the report. "The data clearly did not show that. What it does clearly show is a health care crisis. The fact that we've got 73 percent of homeless saying they have a disabling condition is just tremendous."

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2009 COUNTY HOMELESS

On the street Jan. 21: 1,536

In shelters Jan. 21: 729

Annual estimate: 4,624

Male: 73 percent

Under 18: 12.6 percent

Homeless for a year or more: 54 percent

First-time homeless: 46 percent

Chronically homeless: 42 percent

County residents when they became homeless: 62 percent

Unemployed: 85 percent

Drug or alcohol abuse: 30 percent

Mental health issues: 55 percent

Chronic health problems: 31 percent

Go hungry: 48 percent

SOURCE: 2009 Santa Cruz County Homeless Census and Survey

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However, Connery said the economy may have played a role in the uptick in Watsonville numbers, which rose nearly 75 percent, from 321 people in 2007 to 561 in the 2009 survey. Unemployment in the city also jumped from 17 to 26 percent. Expanded shelter services in South County as well as migration trends — fewer workers are returning to Mexico during the winter due to the expense and increased border enforcement — also likely contributed to the rise, he said.

Fewer than 2 percent of people interviewed said they were homeless due to foreclosure. Though 29 percent of the homeless people interviewed said job loss put them on the street, the percentage hadn't changed significantly since 2007. It remained the No. 1 reason for homelessness, however, followed by alcohol or drug abuse at 15.6 percent.

No one could provide a reason for the 19 percent drop in the homeless count, nor could they be certain it wouldn't climb again.

Paul O'Brien, a consultant with Homeless Action Partnership, said people hurt by the economy might initially tap friends and family for help. But some agencies have reported an increase in demand since January, he said.

"People still may have personal



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Thomas Derochea, himself homeless, checks under the Aptos Village train trestle — a usual haunt of homeless people — in January as part of the 2009 Homeless Census and Survey.

safety net resources," O'Brien said. "Those resources get exhausted several months later."

The survey indicated some success in efforts to get homeless people off the streets and into shelters. In 2007, fewer than 1 in 5 homeless people were sheltered. In January, close to half were living in either emergency shelters or transitional housing.

Wayne Moore is one of the success stories. The 43-year-old said he was homeless for 10 years and struggling with substance abuse before finding

help at the Homeless Persons Health Project, run by the county health department. He was assigned a coordinator, who not only found him housing, but also helped with paperwork and linked him to health and counseling services. Since March 2006, he's been a model tenant in a Santa Cruz apartment complex, prompting the landlord to rent to other homeless people, O'Brien said.

"I hope to inspire other people to get off the street and have a decent place they can call home," Moore said.