

Homeless shelter opens

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Homeless

River Street facility accepts first applicants

By MARIA GAURA

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SANTA CRUZ — After many months of controversy and emotional public debate, Santa Cruz's new homeless shelter opened its doors Sunday night without ceremony.

At 5 p.m. director Fred Gray opened the door to let in the first few applicants and sat down to discuss the rules of the house. About 12 people asked for shelter Sunday, approximately half of them referred from the Santa Cruz County Mental Health Department.

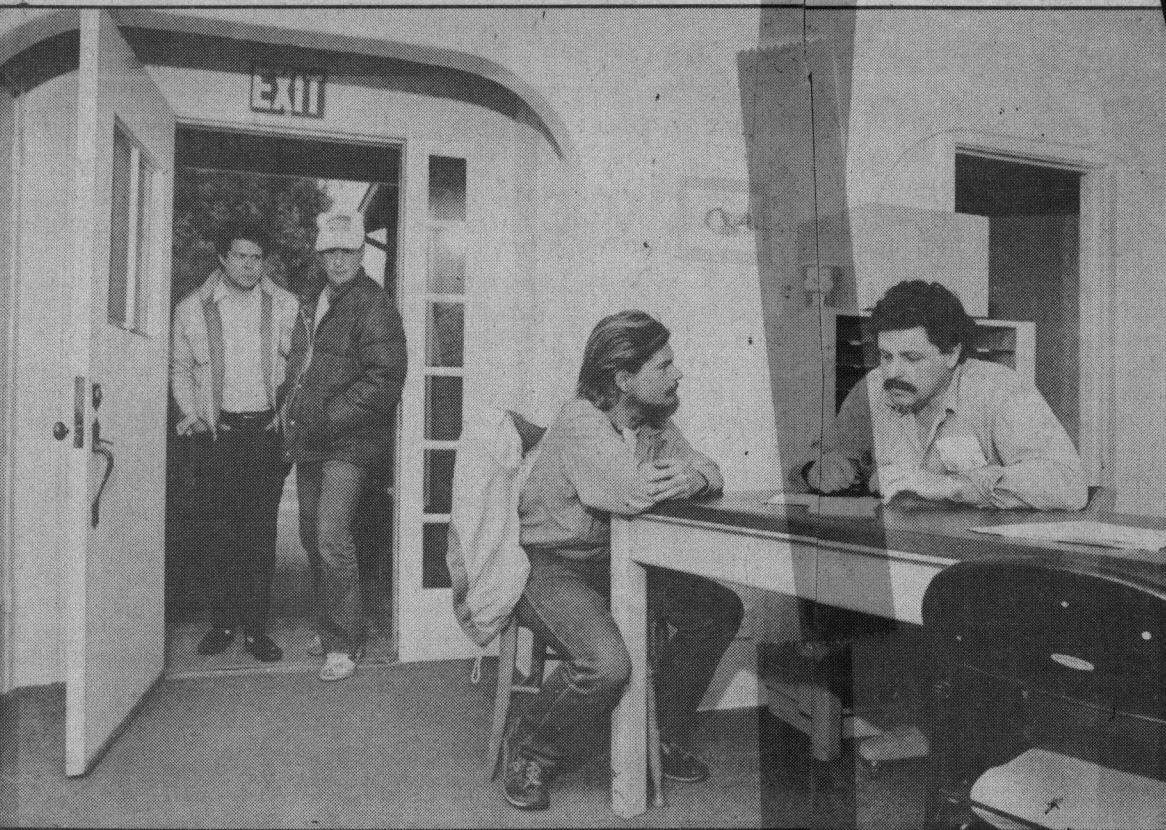
Although the River Street shelter eventually will house 30 homeless people, renovations are still in progress and only 14 beds are available for the time being. Shelter staffers rushed through the first stage of renovations to allow the shelter to open before cold weather arrived.

"Things are going really well tonight," Gray said. "It's a great relief. We didn't know quite what to expect the first night."

Formerly used to house UCSC students, the shelter still has the feel of a dormitory. The decor is bare but warm, and the rec room is furnished with an orange sectional couch and yellow vinyl chairs. A small television loaned by a shelter worker sits atop a brick-and-board shelf, and an old Time magazine lies on a table.

"We're trying to strike a balance between being informal and homey," Gray said.

In the bedrooms the small



Dan Coyro/Sentinel

Director Fred Gray, right, converses with initial applicant Richard Chapman.

metal beds are made up with green wool blankets donated by the Pentagon. The bathrooms are clean but lacking mirrors.

Most of the guests arrived feeling wary, but soon warmed up to the friendly feeling in the room. Several watched an educational television show while others gathered around a table, discussing the stock market and the hardships of being on the street.

A dinner of hot soup and bread and butter was served in the rec room, with everybody lining up

politely to serve themselves. One man rounded up enough chairs for everybody, and another man walked around and picked up the dirty bowls when people were done eating.

Dinner conversation turned on the merits of meat-eating vs. vegetarianism, with a lively debate on the nutritional value of milk products.

"This is a beautiful place," one man said. "Just beautiful, and warm. It's been getting cold at night lately."

Shelter rules are strict, and breaking the rules is cause for eviction. Alcohol, drugs, weapons, violence, sexual activity and stealing are forbidden, and pets are not allowed. Cigarette smoking is allowed outdoors only.

Shelter doors open at 5 p.m. daily, and lights go out at 10 p.m. Wake-up time is 6:45 a.m., and a full breakfast will be served before residents leave at 8 a.m. Guests are allowed 30 consecutive nights at the shelter, and staffers hope to use the time to find people permanent places to live.