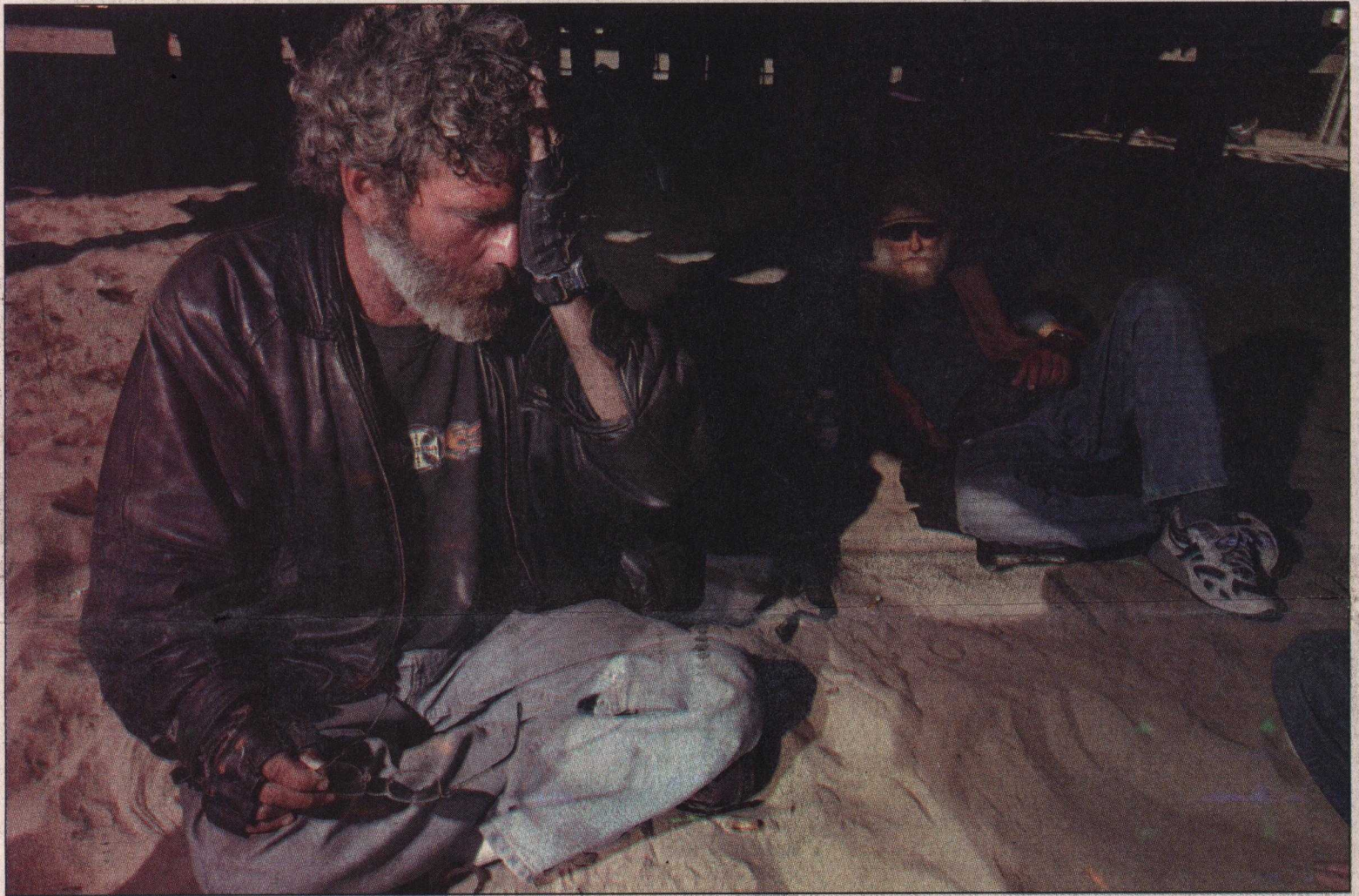


SOBERING EXPERIENCE

New program seeks to keep drunks from clogging ERs, jail



Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel photos

Another day gets its start for Brad Kellman, left, and Joseph Blair, bottle in hand, under the Santa Cruz Municipal Wharf. Dealing with public drunks, police say, puts a burden on the county's emergency services network. A new treatment program may alleviate that load.

Alcoholism

9-19-04



Santa Cruz police officer Wesley Morey confronts a public inebriate on the Santa Cruz Municipal Wharf last week. Law enforcement officials say public drunks occupy a significant amount of their time.

By CATHY REDFERN
SENTINEL STAFF WRITER

SANTA CRUZ — From his sandy spot under the Santa Cruz Municipal Wharf where he lounges with fellow homeless drinkers, Brad Kellman insists he can clean up. The admitted alcoholic and panhandler insists, with a vodka-induced fervor, that he has a sales job at a lighting store waiting for him.

At 48, he still looks young, and is without serious medical problems. He calls himself "tramped out," but his curly gray-streaked hair is fairly tidy, his clothes neat.

But there's a lot he needs to overcome to get sober.

The Chicago native says he's racked up 21 tickets this summer for public inebriation and other offenses provoked by drunkenness. Court records confirm 19.

Kellman is an ideal candidate for a public-inebriate program starting Oct. 11 that seeks to help seri-

al drunks clean up. By helping these people, many of whom are transients, officials hope to reduce the burden of drunks on emergency services like police and hospitals, which routinely handle inebriates.

The county-funded program, inspired by a "tough-love" approach in San Diego, would require so-called "frequent flyers" — those with five or more arrests for public drunkenness in six months — to choose mandatory jail time or treatment. Most repeat offenders now are simply taken into custody until they sober up and released. Prosecution is infrequent.

"We realize this is a tough deal they're going through, but this will open up 911-related services to the general citizenry," said Chief Deputy Len Lofano, head of the Sheriff's Office Detention Bureau.

The longtime problem of public

See **SOBER** on **PAGE A6**

Sober

Continued from Page A1

drunkenness rose to the forefront in April 2003 when paramedics stormed a county Board of Supervisors meeting, claiming public drunks were monopolizing county emergency services.

The county Health Services Agency estimates \$2.6 million is spent unnecessarily on ambulance and emergency-room costs alone annually.

The cost to those who compete with drunks for hospital time is more difficult to quantify.

"When, on any given night, you have four or five (drunken) people sleeping it off (in the emergency room), that is ridiculous. They don't need that level of service, and they obstruct those who do need it," said Dr. Terry Lapid, Dominican Hospital emergency room director.

County officials say the new treatment program will be well worth the \$100,000 budgeted for the year. How much it spares public services and tax dollars, and prompt medical treatment, remains in question.

Program goals

Kellman, his eyes intense and red behind wire-rimmed glasses, says he wants help.

"I'd go into a program in a minute," he says. "I'm a panhandler right now, that's why I'm tramped out, but ... I want to get off this beach."

He cries when telling about his life: He says he served in Vietnam, and tells of cocaine addiction and subsequent imprisonment at San Quentin, his parents' deaths within six months of one another, a wealthy sister in New York he tangled with on Thanksgiving 14 years ago and hasn't seen since.

Getting problem drinkers like Kellman to take interest in the new program is key, says Bill Manov, who heads the county's drug and alcohol treatment programs.

"Helping them see (how addiction affects their lives) is part of the treatment process," he said. "If you can do that, you've got them hooked. Then it's a question of long-term recovery skills."

The \$100,000, diverted from the county's indigent health fund, will add an undetermined number of beds in the seven substance-abuse treatment centers with which the county contracts.

Those directed into treatment will not push others out, including those referred via Proposition 36, Manov said, noting the high demand and lack of funding for sobriety programs.

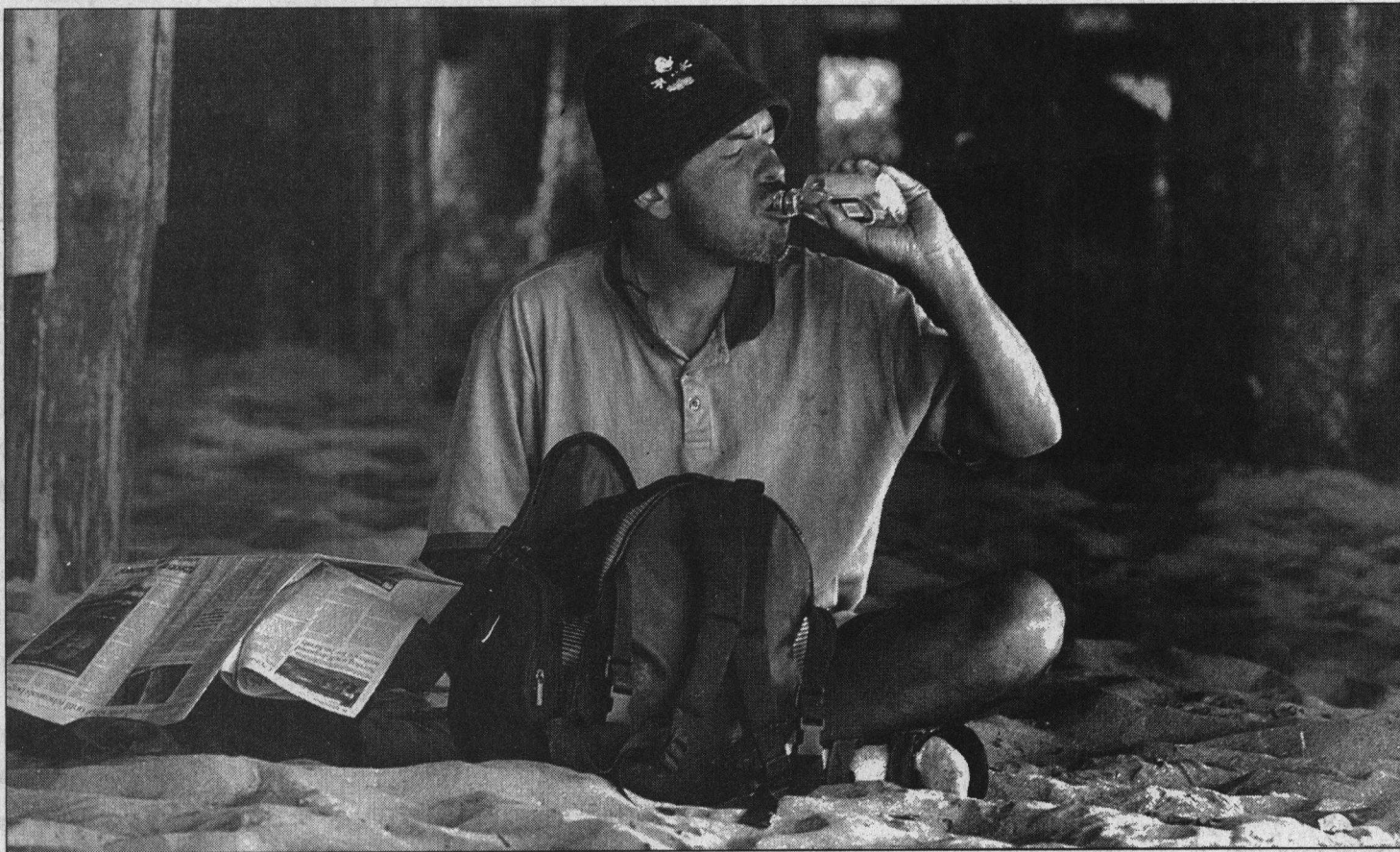
Proposition 36, allowing nonviolent drug offenders to get treatment instead of jail time, has increased the need for substance-abuse programs since its passage in 2000.

County Health Director Rama Khalsa hopes to treat 20 to 25 people in the first year of the county program, most of whom will come from the city of Santa Cruz, where the problem is greatest, she said.

To qualify, candidates must have been arrested five or more times in the county for public inebriation within six months. They will have the option of 30 days in jail or 30 days in a treatment program. If they are arrested again, the sentence of jail or treatment will jump to 90 days and then to 180 days, the maximum.

Obstacles to success

At the wharf, the six or so men within earshot laugh when a



Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel

A transient takes a hit of vodka under the Santa Cruz Municipal Wharf recently. County officials say the greatest concentration of public drunks is within the Santa Cruz city limits.

reporter asks how many programs he's been in.

"I keep trying, that is all I can say," he answers when the noise dies down.

He says he was in a local program a couple years ago but can't explain why he started drinking again. His buddy says he wouldn't drink if he was happy and doing well.

County officials know too well the difficulties of stopping substance abuse, and concede the new program has limitations.

"You don't get to that stage of your drinking career and get a productive life in 30 days (the length of the treatment program)," said Manov. "We know that. We're looking at it as an introduction to recovery."

Health officials also understand that many will decline treatment or just go through the motions.

Such stubbornness is seen with Kellman's friend and fellow "road dog," Joseph "Joey" Andrew Blair. Blair has a room in Watsonville, courtesy of the county's Homeless Persons Health Project, but often stays outside. He says there's no way he wants a program.

The 55-year-old Fort Lauderdale, Fla., native, an alcoholic and heroin addict, has had several heart attacks and freely peels open his black vinyl shave kit to show a jumble of prescription medicine bottles.

"I have two years, maybe, left," he says. "Why waste 30 or 90 days on something that won't work anyway?"

Many like Blair, are happy, even eager to accept jail time or hospital time, police say, since it means a safe place to sleep and perhaps a meal.

"They know the system. If they are too intoxicated, they go to jail, and if they are hurt, they get to go to the hospital to sleep, and that's more comfortable," said Santa Cruz police Lt. Rudy Escalante.

Manov, a 20-year veteran of sobriety programs including one he helped start on Los Angeles' Skid Row, acknowledges much more can be done to effectively deal with public inebriation, but says alternatives come with a higher price tag.

One option is a sobering station where those arrested for public drunkenness can be dropped off in

a recovery facility, rather than going to a more costly jail or emergency room. County officials had no estimate for such a facility, but most agree it could cost millions to build and operate.

To increase the success of treatment programs, expanding them to help those in recovery get jobs and housing would help. This, too, comes at a higher price.

Making it work

As the morning wears on, the men under the wharf sip from concealed bottles and start to get loud. They hit a Beach Flats liquor store as soon as it opens at 7 a.m., saying it has the cheapest vodka around.

They usually sleep somewhere on the beach, Kellman says, though the wharf-area beaches are closed from 11 p.m. to 8:30 a.m.

A police officer soon arrives and asks them to tone it down.

Officers don't have to arrest public inebriates who break minor laws unless a citizen wishes to sign a complaint.

The arrests can take two to 12 hours of an officer's time, said Escalante. With luck, there are no lines in the already overcrowded jail, and the jail nurse can quickly accept the offender. Other times, when an ambulance trip to the hospital is necessary and the person is uncooperative, it can take 10 hours, he said.

At County Jail, inebriates go into a padded, 10-by-20-foot recovery room designed so they can't fall and hurt themselves and typically stay five to seven hours before they're released, jail officials say.

cially say.

If inebriates are determined to be a danger to themselves or others, they are transported to the hospital instead of jail. They are also taken to the hospital when injured or too combative. Jail officials estimate half of the frequent flyers go to the hospital.

Dominican Hospital, on Soquel Drive near the Highway 1 overcrossing, gets the lion's share of the public drunks. The hospital says it costs up to \$500,000 annually to treat them. The hospital reports getting three to five public inebriates daily, who can tie up needed emergency beds out of its short supply of 16, said Dr. Lapid.

Dominican Hospital and Watsonville Community Hospital have gone "Code Red" — emergency rooms are full and hospitals are unable to admit new patients — increasingly during the past four years, county records show.

Last year, the two hospitals went Code Red 1,331 hours, and this year's number is on pace to be even greater.

With lives at stake and treatment costs high for those without medical insurance, Lapid obviously would like to see fewer people diverted to the hospital.

"We're trying," he said. "The model down (in San Diego) works, and I'll take little steps. I'm not looking to cure the world, but once again, we want to serve the community, and appropriate resource utilization is the key to it."

Other partners in the program agree, including the county Health Services Agency, Santa Cruz and Watsonville police departments,

the Sheriff's Office, judges, prosecutors, public defenders, and probation and hospital officials.

They point to the success in San Diego, where two years after the program began in 2000, 65 percent of the recipients attained some level of sobriety and 58 percent were not arrested the following year.

County officials concede, however, that San Diego has a more expansive program and more resources.

While sobriety is a huge leap for those like Kellman, program organizers say even a handful of repeat offenders taken from the system will free up resources of police, emergency dispatchers, jail deputies, firefighters, ambulance drivers and hospital workers.

"Even a small percentage begins to save money in terms of hospital and jail costs," Manov said.

Some level of burden on public services will remain.

Blair, the alcoholic and heroin addict, smiles on the beach and says he's come to terms with his life just the way it is.

"I've had a good life. I'm straight with God, except for a little token reefer, drinking and cursing. But I don't think God is mad about that."

"But someone did steal my book last night while I was all (messed) up," he said. "It was called 'Fools Die' by Mario somebody. Puzo, I think."

Contact Cathy Redfern at credfern@santacruzsentinel.com.