

Funding set for homeless day center

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SANTA CRUZ — Funding for a day center for the homeless will be available just as soon as a final proposal is submitted to the city of Santa Cruz and a site is located.

More than \$250,000 in state Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) funds — earmarked for homeless projects — was recently awarded to the city of Santa Cruz. A significant portion of that money has been identified as appropriate for the day center, which would offer showers, laundry facilities, storage lockers and serve as an access point for health and social services.

In its first year, the center expects to provide 72,000 meals; 36,500 showers; 7,500 loads of laundry; locker space for 150 people; phone and mail service for 350; and 3,000 hours of supervised, drug- and alcohol-free "gathering time" for homeless people.

Dubbed the "Homeless Community Resource Center," it would be run by Karen Gillette, currently the director of the highly successful A Free Meal food-service program. A Free Meal, under the auspices of the non-profit William James Association, serves as many as 300 homeless people a day from its location behind the River Street

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— Scott Kennedy,
city councilman

Shelter. The meal program would be absorbed into the day center.

Provided an adequate site can be found, the center could be open as soon as Oct. 1. It would be subject to review by several city agencies, said Gillette.

City Councilman Scott Kennedy said most of the project's major political hurdles appear to have been cleared.

"We're in effect waiting for a proposal." The council, Kennedy said, sees the day center as a "priority" and is "eager to see a specific proposal."

Upcoming city budget sessions, he said, shouldn't affect the day

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center funding since "it's not really tied to the budget process per se." The city secured the state funding in March after the Coalition for a Safe Place to Sleep presented the council with a day-center plan that became the basis of the city's CDBG grant request.

"Nobody's arguing that it's not a good idea. They're just arguing about where would you put it ..." said Kennedy.

A local real-estate agent is coordinating the search for a site. The most promising location appears to be in the vicinity of the River Street Shelter in the city's Harvey West Park area. Gillette has said repeatedly that center organizers

are not interested in a downtown location.

The Coalition continues to have a role in planning the day center, as well as advocating better services for the homeless in general, said Gillette. "We're very grateful to them."

Supporters and area social-service providers see the day center as a crucial tool in breaking the cycle of homelessness. Without access to sanitary facilities, meals, mail pickup, phone service and job, health and counseling resources, the journey off the street is that much more difficult, said Will Lightbourne, Human Resources Agency Administrator for the County of Santa Cruz.

Although the county would not

be contributing funds toward the day center, Lightbourne said the Human Resources Agency has donated staff time and resources toward the effort.

"Anything that adds stability to the life of a homeless person helps," said Lightbourne. "It's hard to get into things that require regularity (like a job or housing) if your whole life is unstable."

A day center would also give homeless people a place to congregate away from the Pacific Avenue shopping and business district, said Bob Campbell, director of the River Street Shelter.

"It's absolutely needed and it fills a huge gap for those people who are homeless and don't have psychiatric disabilities," he said.

Campbell believes a day center would serve to "normalize the people who are homeless downtown, and normalize their role on the mall, in the shopping area."

Kennedy said the day center has benefited from a "broad community consensus," a departure from the atmosphere in the city less than a year ago.

Last summer, anti-homeless demonstrators sought to "Take Back Our Town" with a July 4 rally. During that same time period, homeless activists were repeatedly ticketed by police for holding a long-running sleep-in at the downtown Post Office in protest of the city's camping ban.

Several of the individuals who were involved in the Post Office