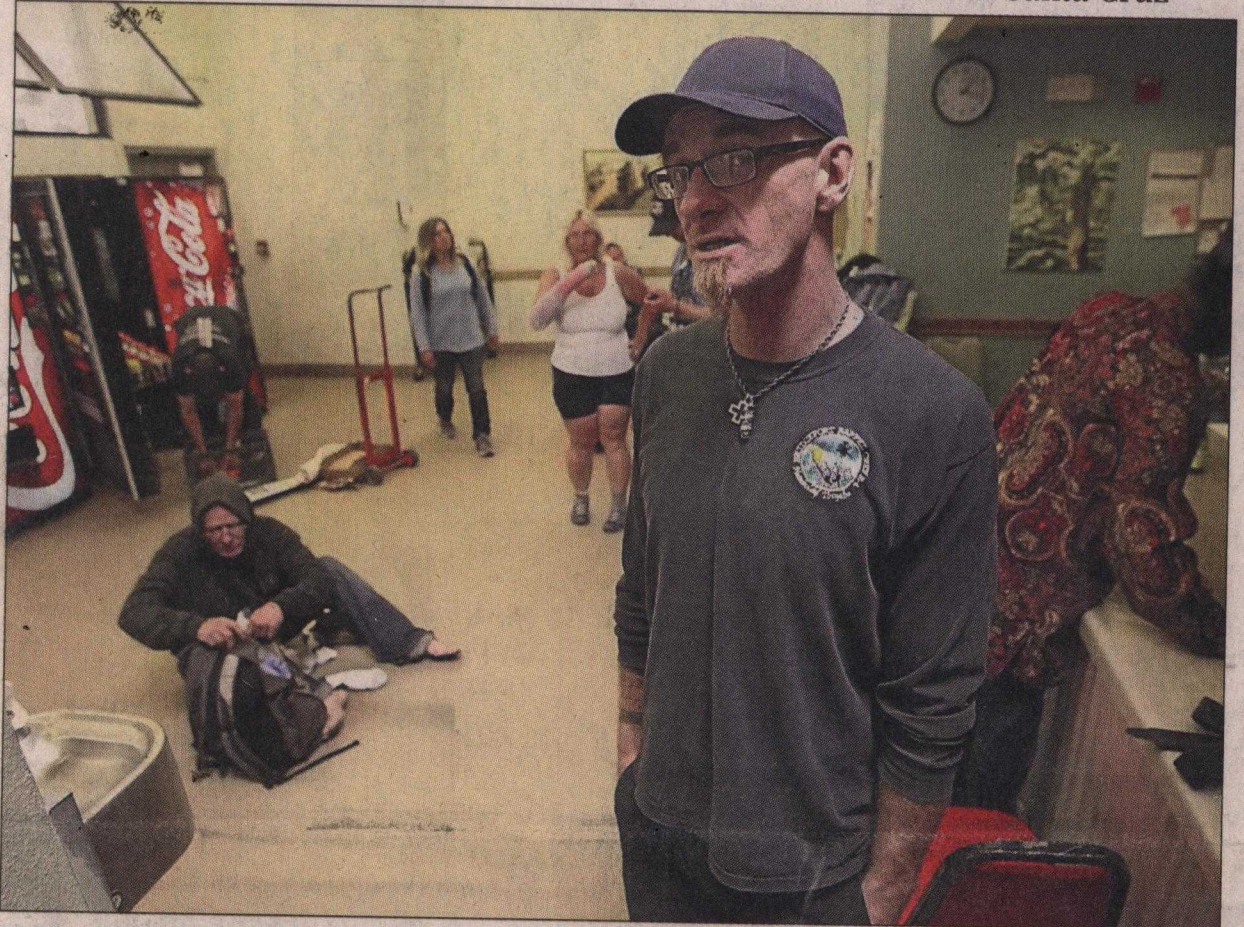


A COMMUNITY BUT NOT A HOME

Former wildlands firefighter lives on front line of homelessness in Santa Cruz



DAN COYRO — SANTA CRUZ SENTINEL

Long-time homeless man Dexter Fallen is the direct services coordinator at Homeless Services Center, but still lives in a tent and continues to look for housing.

Homeless - 2000

EDITOR'S NOTE: This story is one in an occasional series about the many faces of Santa Cruz County's homeless population.

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SANTA CRUZ » They show up in a continuous trickle of "strong personalities," dozens of people every hour, many brightly doe-eyed and utterly vulnerable or cold and sour. They have no home and no idea what to do next.

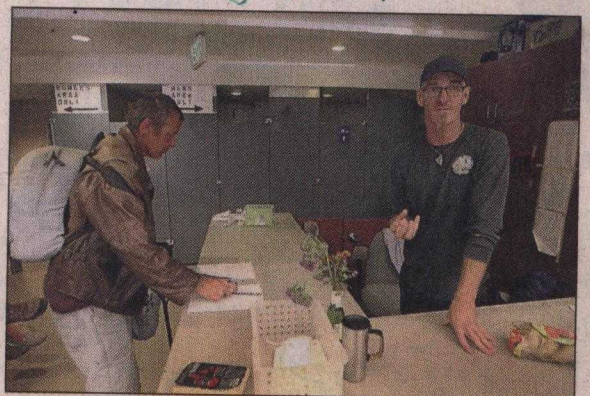
And sometimes they need to be carried up the stairs to the "loft," intoxicated and unable to stand on their own two feet.

Dexter Fallen, who has observed these traits and more in the past several months, is one of the first people these often newly homeless meet when they come to Santa Cruz and find their way to the Homeless Services Center's Paul Lee Loft on Coral Street.

Fallen, 33, has himself been homeless on and off since running away from home in Reno, Nevada, at age 16. He began working for the agency — first as a custodian at the family shelter, later at the day center and emergency shelter — some seven months ago.

"A great deal of people out here wouldn't be able to survive without this

STIGMA » PAGE 4



DAN COYRO — SANTA CRUZ SENTINEL

Dexter Fallen, at right, is direct services coordinator at the Homeless Services Center. He still lives in a tent but looks for housing.

"Dexter is so meticulous and thoughtful. He really cares for the people."

— Chris Monteith

Stigma

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help," said Fallen, a past Boy Scout and U.S. Forest Service firefighter who said he feels more prepared than most. "They usually live behind walls their whole lives."

Although Fallen has bounced from job to job through the years, always feeling the call to leave and find something "bigger" after a while, he said in a recent interview that he feels as if he has found "home" in Santa Cruz, and appreciates the work he is doing with others in the same or worse situations as his own. Even if home is still a tent in the woods with his girlfriend.

"Some people keep a positive outlook, a wonderful attitude (at the shelter). It inspires me every day," Fallen said. "When someone's angry, I keep poking them until they smile. I try and kill them with kindness. There are a couple of people I

haven't reached yet, but they'll come around."

Chris Monteith, the Homeless Services Center's residential services program manager, said he "poached" Fallen from his custodial work and had him fill in at his current job, where "he just killed it," doing a commendable job.

"Dexter is so meticulous and thoughtful. He's really cares for the people," Monteith said. "He's saved my ass a lot. (Direct services) is a real hard job, so many people come in with mental health issues and drug abuse problems."

Monteith said it is his goal to help employ as many of the county's homeless people as he can find jobs for, because "it's the least we can do with so few services in the county."

Fallen, when asked if being employed to assist people in similar situations as his own ever seems contradictory, said he just tries to provide a positive example for others and tries to re-

member to accept people as they are.

"When I'm there, I'm not an authority or a boss," Fallen said of his work. "We all just have to respect each other and love each other. It's about what people see every day (in your actions)."

Between the incomes of he and his girlfriend of nine months, Nevin, Fallen said he could afford to rent an apartment, and is seeking out that possibility. However, a rental history that includes residence at a homeless shelter and in the Forest Service barracks for years before that make him look like a financial risk to landlords, he believes.

"Being homeless, you need an excellent record (to rent)," Fallen said. "When I first got to Santa Cruz, I sent out 17 apartment applications and listed (the shelter) 115 Coral St. as my address. I didn't get one, not one, call back."

Others' perceptions of the homeless, though, Fallen said, are generally based on individual interactions.

There are always a range of personalities in any group, from the violent methamphetamine-addicted people who "do some serious power-walking in the bushes" to those such as Fallen, who attempt to stay under the radar and are looking to get back on their feet.

"I want to stop and build something here. This place has completely allowed me. (This city is) manifesting good energies. The more I put in here, the more I get back," Fallen said.

Working at the Homeless Services Center, Fallen said, has put him within viewing distance of change. While sometimes finding a place to rent "feels like an improbability, like everything is weighed against us," Fallen said he respects the pride Santa Cruz residents take in their town and their ongoing efforts to find a solution to homelessness.

"It's slow progress, but slow progress is better than no progress," Fallen said. "I like being here to see that."