

Homeless program is lauded

Report calls for one centralized aid program

By GREG BEEBE
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WATSONVILLE — One night in a homeless shelter changed Sister Susan Olson's life.

The Catholic nun was living in Washington D.C. when she was invited to spend the night at one of the city's shelters.

Olson, 47, remembers being "appalled at what I saw. I said, I've got to do something about this."

What Olson has done is direct the highly successful Pajaro Valley Shelter Services, now in its eighth year. The private, non-profit, non-secular shelter is "a model program in our community," said Judy Schwartz, senior analyst with the county Human Resources Agency.

Schwartz and HSA administrator Will Lightbourne have collaborated on two "briefing papers" on homeless services and gaps in service for the City Selection Committee's task force on homelessness. The latest recommendations, analyzing ways to develop better services for the homeless, incorporate many of the elements of Sister Susan's shelter.

"Pajaro Valley Shelter is an exemplary program," Schwartz said. "They do really excellent case management with homeless families and they're a shelter provider as well. They just do a really great job of working on all the broad ranges of issues and problems that underlie a family's homeless situation."

Pajaro Valley Shelter offers a variety of services, said Olson, including emergency shelter for women and children; a "Kidspace" child care center mixing "homeless kids with kids from the community"; intensive case management counseling; and apartments, duplexes and houses scattered through South County offering transitional shelter for homeless families "of all configurations," said Olson.

The shelter — which began as a model federal Housing and Urban Development (HUD) program — operates with the help of several organizations, including the Watsonville Housing Improvement Association, Habitat for Humanity, the Red Cross, and the city of Watsonville.

The city, said Olson, has "backed us on everything we've done. None of these programs could have gone on without some city help."

As many as 75 people are using the various Pajaro shelters at one time, and the roster of shelter housing units continues to grow.

Successful Pajaro Shelter graduates are people "who choose to do a whole lot of things for themselves. They have to make the difference themselves, they have to be ready and willing," Olson said.

The shelter strives to "build real relationships with these people. We try not to be institutionalized. We try to be as personal as we can, and we cheer them on."

Among the counseling programs offered at the shelter are personal finance and renter's education classes, both of which help clients fare better out in the real world.

Last year, 66 percent of the shelter's



Dan Coyro/Sentinel

Sister Susan Olson chats with some of her visitors at Watsonville homeless shelter.

occupants found adequate, long-term housing. "It's worth the eight years of work," Olson said.

The latest Human Resources Agency report lists three "high-priority" needs for the estimated 2,000 homeless in Santa Cruz County: case management and service coordination; transitional housing; and daytime access to sanitary/hygiene facilities.

The City Selection Committee took the report at its Feb. 21 meeting. Although no formal vote was taken, the committee "agreed as a next step that city (of Santa Cruz) staff would meet with county staff to work toward a more concrete plan," Schwartz said.

Case management and service coordination

"Although many services are available to Santa Cruz County residents who are homeless or at risk of becoming homeless, the system of services is scattered and fragmented," said the HRA report.

There are few places where homeless clients can receive comprehensive, one-stop counseling and referrals, said the report. "As a result, homeless families and individuals often find the service system bewildering and frustrating."

The HRA report suggests the creation of a private, non-profit Homeless Case Management Center, "funded by a com-

bination of private and public sources" and incorporating many of the successful aspects of the Pajaro Valley Shelter.

First-year cost of the HCMC would be approximately \$315,000, Schwartz said. The HCMC would serve a minimum of 120 families and individuals, and place at least 85 into permanent housing.

The center, Schwartz said, is not designed to serve every homeless person in the county. Rather it would target individuals who are ready to make a commitment to resolve the problems contributing to their homelessness.

Clients of the center would be assigned a case manager who would provide "long-term, comprehensive, supportive case management." A typical plan of action may address such problems as income; education; job skills; language skills; parenting skills; child care; physical or psychological disabilities; substance abuse; and domestic and/or child abuse.

Other services would include financial assistance via a revolving loan fund; resource counseling and advocacy; emergency shelter placement and eviction prevention; money management and renter's education; employment and education services; child care assistance; health, mental health, and substance abuse treatment and referral;

transitional housing placement; and permanent housing placement.

Transitional housing

Many homeless persons are unable to make the move from the streets to permanent housing, Schwartz said. The Pajaro Valley Shelter has illustrated the benefits of a transitional housing environment where clients "can stay inexpensively for 6 to 18 months while they participate in a case management program," Schwartz said.

Currently, the only transitional housing units for the homeless in the county are in Watsonville. A total of 35 transitional housing units for families, and 20 for single adults, are needed for North and Mid-County, said the HRA report.

Daytime access to sanitary/hygiene facilities

"There is a need for daytime access to toilets, showers and laundry facilities, particularly for the homeless street population that congregates in the city of Santa Cruz," said the HRA report.

A daytime homeless center, said Schwartz, would give homeless persons a place to store possessions, receive mail, and get outreach counseling from service providers who could make "non-threatening overtures to members of the homeless population who do not usually seek out services," said the report.