

# Community Action Board hears impact of poverty



DAN COYRO — SANTA CRUZ SENTINEL

Chris Brown addresses the Community Action Board public forum on poverty Wednesday, explaining how his involvement with nonprofit changed his life as a former repeat offender.

## Homelessness, jobs take center stage

By Samantha Clark

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**SANTA CRUZ »** About 75 people gathered at the Loudon Nelson Community Center in Santa Cruz on Wednesday night for a public meeting to discuss poverty.

The input will help the Community Action Board of Santa Cruz County determine how

best to address local needs for the next two years.

For 50 years, the Community Action Board has worked to help people improve their financial situation with a slate of services, which focus on job training and placement help, housing and homelessness support, immigration legal assistance and programs for teens and seniors.

"We're here to ask the ques-

tion of 'What is the impact of poverty?' said Maria Elena De La Garza, executive director of the Community Action Board. "It's our role to bring the topic up and take a snapshot of its impact in this community."

Poverty isn't talked about enough, she said.

About 14 percent of Santa Cruz County residents live below the federal poverty line — \$24,250 for a family of four.

De La Garza said she is looking at prioritizing immigration, housing, violence and jobs

for 2016 and 2017.

During the public forum, residents talked about their struggles to make ends meet and shared success stories about the Community Action Board's aid programs.

"If it wasn't for the Day Worker Center, I'd be up a creek without a paddle," said Chris Boykin, who's been finding work regularly for the past two years now. "Before I had nothing and was homeless for four years. Now I can make ends meet."

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## Poverty

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Abi Camarillo, 16, of Santa Cruz pressed that the North Coast Teen Center needs more resources.

"We really need new computers. They freeze, sometimes they don't even work and we don't even have speakers," she said. "Sometimes we don't have enough volunteers to help us with our homework."

Some asked for better data on poverty locally, and others brought up how improving health would help alleviate poverty.

"Substance abuse is clearly related to one's housing and employment," said Rod Libbey, executive director of Janus of Santa Cruz. "In order to be suc-

cessful in recovery, if you don't have some kind of stability you're not going to be successful."

The employment program Alcance's Yobani Martinez, who connects people looking for jobs with businesses, said that simply throwing people back into the job force doesn't work.

"It's difficult to get people job ready when they're battling addiction or to wear a suit when they live in their car," Martinez said. "We need more case management and more resources."

Most of the conversation centered on affordable housing and homelessness. Advocates proposed ideas of safe parking programs for people living in their vehicles, more temporary shelters during cold snaps and parks as nighttime sanctuaries for the homeless.

The recent spate of violence in South County has prompted a need to talk about violence and its relationship with poverty, De La Garza said.

"Gangs offer things that a good family offers — love and support — the only thing is that they ask more," said Vivian Vargas, vice principal of Ohlone Elementary School in Watsonville.

Another public forum will take place at 6:30 p.m. March 18 at the Old City Hall in Watsonville. Afterward, the Community Action Board will combine the public comment with local statistics and research for a formal action plan that will go to the nonprofit's board in June and then to the state Department of Community Services and Development for review.