

# Homelessness sees increase



A homeless couple walk along the Pajaro River levee Wednesday.

Tarmo Hannula/Register-Pajaronian

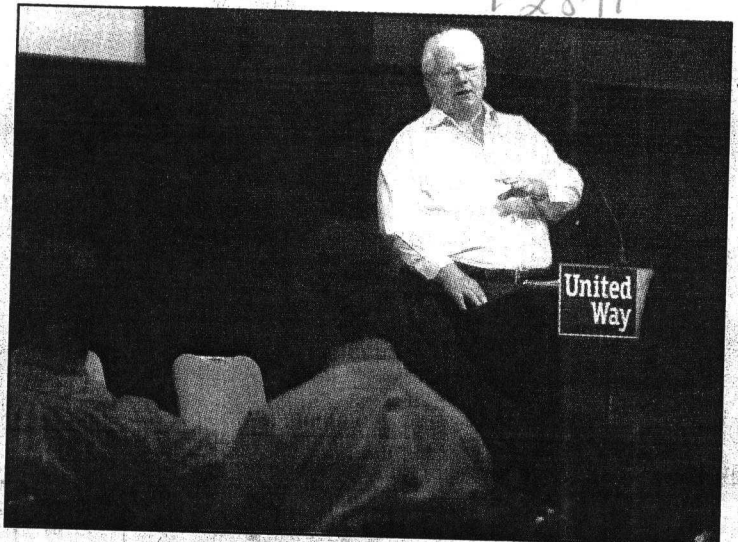
## Census: Homelessness rises in county, drops in Watsonville

By TARMO HANNULA

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The 2011 Santa Cruz County Homeless Census revealed Wednesday a 22 percent increase in the number of homeless individuals living in the county compared to 2009.

Every two years, the census is taken nationwide, with the "point in time" survey taken in Santa Cruz County Jan. 25. Communities across the country conduct comprehensive counts of their homeless population in order to gain a better understanding of the current homeless population and to apply for federal funding for homeless programs. Forty volunteers and 60 homeless guides canvassed 52 U.S. Census tracts in the county to directly observe homeless people in nonshelter, nonservice public locations. A total of 2,771 homeless people were counted in the 2011 census, compared to 2,265 in 2009.



Tarmo Hannula/Register-Pajaronian

Peter Connery, vice president of Applied Survey Research, talks about the 2011 Santa Cruz County Homeless Census and Survey on Wednesday at Twin Lakes Church in Aptos.

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Watsonville police officer Scott Mead inspects a homeless camp on the Pajaro River Wednesday as part of his routine patrol duties.

# HOMELESS

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“While many communities across the nation have seen slight increases in their homeless population, we were surprised by the increase in Santa Cruz County,” said Peter Connery, vice president of Applied Survey Research, the local nonprofit research firm that conducted the survey. “The increased number of homeless individuals under that age of 25 was particularly alarming. Nationally, this group has been called the ‘lost or forsaken generation’ as they have fallen

on hard times at an early age and may have a more difficult time recovering socially and economically from this experience.”

There was a 39 percent increase in the number of those experiencing homelessness for the first time in 2011 compared to 2009. Sixty-three percent of the homeless population was experiencing at least one disabling condition, and 24 percent of the population had some form of employment in 2011 compared to 15 percent in 2009.

According to the census report, which was funded by the Homeless Action Partnership and the United Way of Santa

Cruz County, close to 2 million people in America experience homelessness each year. More individuals were under the age of 18 and living on the street as unaccompanied minors, while 17 percent of homeless are people in families and 21 percent are under the age of 25.

The majority of the homeless population was living in the county when they became homeless and the “home grown” population appears to be increasing, according to the census.

Homelessness increased in the cities of Scotts Valley, Santa Cruz, and Capitola, while Watsonville experienced a decrease.

Catherine Martin was introduced at the meeting Wednesday and she explained to the audience her encounter with homelessness. She explained how the construction company she and her husband operated fell apart once her husband died of pancreatic cancer.

“As the economy got worse, it became harder to finance our home and in 2009 I was foreclosed on,” she said. “I didn’t

know what to do. So I lived out of my car silently with my two kids. I was too ashamed to tell anyone.”

Martin went on to explain how she would park the car in various spots around the county and camp inside it while hoping not to be disturbed.

“Then I met Families in Transition and in December 2010 I found a home,” she said. “I’m now in school to become a building inspector. I’m really thankful I found them.”

Martin described the homeless period as “very difficult and extremely challenging.”

On Wednesday afternoon, Anita, a 64-year-old homeless woman in Watsonville, said she had been homeless for the past two years.

“I think there are about 200 homeless out here,” she said as she pointed at the Pajaro River levee. “It’s tough. There are troublemakers but there are good people, too. Many of us fell apart once her husband died of work. I used to pick strawberries, broccoli and lettuce. I cook for a lot of these people. They respect me. I lost my husband 10 years ago and I’ve been in Watsonville my whole life.”