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# Familia BEACH FLATS Center closes to regroup

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Santa Cruz's Familia Center, which for nearly a decade provided social services and the only community meeting place for the city's poorest residents in the Beach Flats neighborhood, has run into hard times of its own.

Short on funds and without a director, Familia closed its offices on Raymond Street near the Beach Boardwalk three weeks ago.

## Looking to future

The center is now looking for board members, searching for a new home and rethinking its priorities.

What shape the new Familia Center takes — or whether it takes any shape at all — is of great importance to the neighborhood.

An estimated 80 percent of the 2,000 residents in Beach Flats are Hispanic, many of them newly arrived immigrants from Mexico and Central America.

## 'Only place'

"There's no other center or church or schools down there," said Alex Reveles, chairman of Friends of Familia. "Familia is really the only place people can turn to."

In a neighborhood known by many Santa Cruzans as a center for gang activity, drugs and overpriced, dilapidated housing, Familia has struggled to make a positive difference.

Since it opened in 1983, Familia has offered free medical care, English tutoring, immigration information, drug abuse prevention classes and referrals to county health and job services.

It also has tried to bring the tiny community closer together. Last year, for example, Familia offered free classes in traditional

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## LA FAMILIA

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Mexican folk dancing and set up soccer leagues for children.

Although it has received high marks for those efforts, the center has never been adept at fund raising, city leaders say.

The bulk of the center's operating budget has always come from an annual community development block grant from the city, each year totaling about \$60,000.

Hopes that the center could build on the money with regular outside donations did not materialize. A fund-raising dance held last February, for example, raised \$30.

"We were not an organization that was beating on everybody's doors every two weeks (for money)," said Nancy de la Pena, vice chairwoman of the Familia board. "In retrospect, maybe we should have. But we were providing services."

Director Marcos Rodriguez left the center in August to pursue a graduate degree. The board could offer only \$30,000 a year for a new director. Qualified bilingual applicants stayed away, knowing they could earn twice that in similar jobs.

"They got one good applicant and he was bilingual," City Councilman Scott Kennedy said. "But he spoke German. That wasn't ex-

actly what they were looking for."

When the recession hit, more Beach Flats residents needed help than ever before. Its resources stretched to the limit, the center first cut its hours, then closed to reorganize.

Part of the problem: The center was paying \$2,000 a month in rent for an inadequate, small building.

"It was just a ramshackle dump of an old house," Kennedy said. "It's an outrage that public funds were paying for a facility like that."

Kennedy has been working with Councilwoman Jane Yokoyama and Familia board members to find a better home for the center.

City funding was suspended when the center closed Feb. 2. That left \$27,000 that could be used as a down payment to buy a new building.

Board members are negotiating to buy a \$205,000 house at Eastcliff and Pearl streets. If the deal is completed, they say, the center could save \$500 a month and eventually own the building.

If everything goes according to plan, Familia can reopen in June.

"They have a very critical role to play in our community," Yokoyama said. "I'm hoping — and expecting — they'll come back stronger than ever."