

Homeless center increases security

Campus to feature new fencing, institute photo IDs

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SANTA CRUZ » Calls for greater safety and accountability in the comings and goings of Homeless Services Center clients are about to bear fruit.

Working under a Santa Cruz City Council-initiated 90-day mandate to erect security fencing and establish photo identification cards at the Coral Street campus, the center is within days of completing the project's first stages.

The ultimatum, issued in May, required the nonprofit agency to complete the project as a condition for receiving an annual budget contribution from the city. Additionally, in 2012, the city committed \$71,000 for the security project and Santa Cruz County joined the following year with a \$47,000 grant.

On Thursday, drills whirled loudly as parts of the driveway fence and security kiosk were put up. Foot traffic in and out of the facility — which also houses the River Street Shelter and Homeless Persons Health Project — was not yet restricted due to last-minute delays with ID production. Eventually, visitors will access the campus by swiping ID cards at a kiosk to enter through a pedestrian and vehicle gate.

The cards will contain user photographs, a personal ID number and an electronic bar code. The cards will link users to the existing Homeless Management Information System, a national program allowing service providers to share information.

Michael Sartin, a painter who has been a Homeless Services Center guest for the past

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month since his van broke down, praised the new security.

"The control of the campus, the ability of people to come and go is still going to be there. But the people that cause problems and what-not, it will be easier to keep them under control, too," Sartin said. "I mean, they're way more than benevolent here and they do so much for so many people. But by the same token there's an element that has no appreciation for that, and they need to be dealt with here."

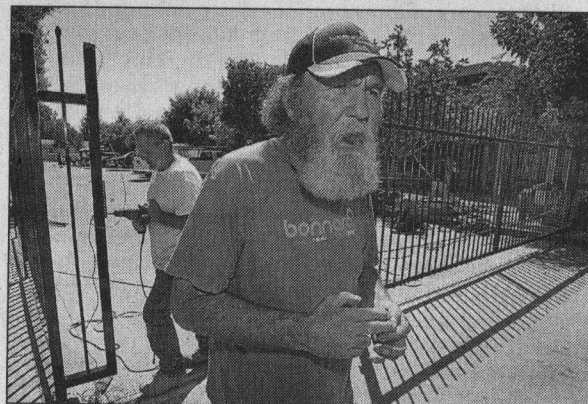
City spokesman Keith Sterling said the enclosure provides a more "structured environment."

"The reason that we were interested in the gate is to create a single point of entry at the center," Sterling said. "There was an ongoing problem of staff being unaware of who was on campus at any given point in time because there wasn't a clear entry."

Councilwoman Pamela Comstock, who has been supportive of the new ID system and fencing, said the project "was really in response to community concerns about safety on the campus. This is really about a safe campus for the people who are the most vulnerable."

How it will work

The Homeless Services Center is taking the new security as a positive change, spokeswoman Valerie Thomas said. When new visitors arrive, they will be asked to go through an intake process and can be immediately directed toward specific services and facilities on campus. Newcomers will be issued their own



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Homeless Services Center client Michael Sartin says he's relieved the Center is installing gates at the facility.

photo IDs, printed on-site for future re-entry.

Those who forget or lose IDs still may be granted access thanks to a new computer system that will bring up individuals' information and photos at the kiosk, Thomas said. Visitors who prefer not to go through intake and get an ID will only be given escorted access to a bathroom facility, day or night, she said.

The ID program, Thomas said, has been designed to avoid denying services to anyone in need. Those who have not been included in the center's database already will be able to go through the organization's intake process upon arrival, and still get a hot meal and bed if needed, Thomas said.

"If they're hungry, we're not making them stand out there and saying, 'Oh no, you don't have a card, you can't come in,'" Thomas said.

The identification will not be used to track criminal or mental health issues or involve a background check. Existing case managers will continue to work with visitors to identify their needs, as well as potential threats, however, Thomas said.

"It's not tracking them.

We're not a policing agency," Thomas said. "If you start to make them feel like they're being tracked, you're going to lose trust. It's all about building trust ... and dignity."

Those whose activity merits temporary, long-term or permanent banishment from the facilities will be easier to track with the cards, Thomas said.

Existing security checks at individual buildings — including the Rebele Family Shelter, the Paul Lee Loft, the Page Smith Community House, the Recuperative Care Center, the Daytime Essential Services Center and the River Street Shelter — will remain. One facility, the Homeless Persons Health Project, will maintain an exterior entry point.

A foot gate exiting on River Street eventually will become an exit-only door once equipment arrives, Thomas said. In the meantime, the exit will be staffed by center staff to curb unmonitored entry.

The security effort also coincides with ongoing work to establish a new community meeting room, computer room and Dientes Community Dental office, Thomas said.

A community call

Harvey West neighborhood advocates and businesses have called for greater accountability of the center's guests for years. Concerns were heightened after the May 2012 killing of downtown business owner Shannon Collins.

Suspected killer Charles Anthony Edwards III, a homeless man with a history of mental health issues, was staying at the Paul Lee Loft at the time of the homicide, which took place on Broadway near downtown. Edwards, whose case has not gone to trial yet, is due back in court Oct. 30.

Thomas said center staff are respectful of neighborhood concerns and has conducted outreach with businesses and residents.

"It's easy to point to the time when it may seem like there was a breakdown, but how many times have we prevented that from happening, just because we said 'Hi. You're hungry, you need a shower, you need a bed, let's get you on case management,' or 'Oh, you should be on medication,'" Thomas said.

In coming weeks, the Santa Cruz Police Department plans to increase its patrols in the Harvey West neighborhood near the center to address potential residual problems at the perimeter or further out into the neighborhood, Deputy Chief Steve Clark said.

"Our strategy will be fluid and adaptable to try and address any residual issues," Clark said. "Our hope is that any residual issues are not long term and the message travels that with compassion comes accountability and that accountability is being taken more seriously in and around the center."