



Homelessness workgroup calls for local inspiration

Written by Eliza Ridgeway - Town Crier Staff Writer
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Photo Town Crier File Photo

San Antonio Place in Mountain View is one of the newer local low-income developments.

The North County Homeless Housing Coalition facilitated a discussion on homelessness at St. Timothy's Episcopal Church in Mountain View last week with the goal of increasing local permanent housing for the homeless.

The coalition consists of four members, Los Altos residents Julie Barton, Sue Shaffer and Duncan MacVicar, and Sunnyvale resident Gisela Daetz, and works to develop housing using a community-driven approach. The group coalesced two years ago when the Mountain View Community Services Agency's rotating homeless shelter project, Alpha Omega, closed operations. The shelter moved from church to church and had begun to fade as donations and regional funding dried up, homeless clients drifted away from the program and church venues became more difficult to find, according to CSA Executive Director Tom Myers, who attended last week's meeting.

The Feb. 2 meeting gave local organizers an opportunity to hear from individuals who are or were recently homeless, as well as from potential volunteers. Both groups spoke with frustration about the limited options for land and space on the Peninsula. The coalition is pursuing a housing model known as "housing first," which emphasizes placing homeless men and women in permanent studios and apartment units rather than temporary shelter spaces.

In a presentation explaining the concept, MacVicar outlined how permanent housing - even when initially subsidized by taxpayers - costs less than the social-service resources required to support an individual living on the street.

"The theory is that the housing is permanent, (they are ultimately able) to start paying rent and the subsidy goes someplace else," he said.

He cited the high expense of emergency room medical care, police services and jail expenses as some of the hidden costs of homelessness for the community.

"Even if you pay \$100,000 per unit (to construct a space) and it's costing \$10,000 a year to have that unit occupied. ... It costs about \$60,000 a year for taxpayers to support one homeless person," he said.

Santa Clara County conducts a census of homeless residents every two years (the 2009 count occurred last month). Mountain View registers a population of more than 300 homeless men and women.

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The coalition concluded that Mountain View (and Los Altos, with which it shares a fluid border when it comes to unhoused populations) needs approximately 100 housing-first units, which would also require (and benefit from) on-site social services support. MacVicar pointed to a host of categories of capital and operating funding available, but said that land and community support remained the missing pieces.

Barton said that coalition members are scheduled to meet this week to review the suggestions they gathered, get in touch with meeting attendees interested in further involvement and encourage Mountain View representation on the coalition. She said that community building would likely be a first order of business.

“It is not easy for folks who own their own homes and live in relative stability and nice neighborhoods to really come to grips with the fact that these folks need homes too,” she said.

Beyond building theoretical support, they have a practical wish list – “We need to find out who can help us raise money and find some land or a convertible building,” Barton said.

The coalition has a successful model nearby. San Antonio Place, the apricot-and-butter-colored apartment complex visible just behind the Community School of Music and Arts, houses 118 efficiency studios rented to low-income residents. Charities Housing, a local non-profit organization, built the facility with funding assistance from the Housing Trust of Santa Clara County, a non-profit that receives financial support from Los Altos, Los Altos Hills and Mountain View.

But those studios filled swiftly, as do the few other similar regional housing projects, said coalition members. The challenge, they said, is to create and maintain enough units so that, year in and year out, as individuals become homeless, a spot exists where they can settle.

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