

Homelessness on the Mendocino Coast

By Anna Shaw, Executive Director, Mendocino Coast Hospitality Center

Healthy Mendocino Editor's Note: Housing and homelessness play a key role in community health and well-being. This month, Healthy Mendocino continues to explore housing issues throughout Mendocino County by focusing on the current trends on the Mendocino Coast.

Homelessness is an issue which affects the whole of Mendocino County. The coast of Mendocino (between Gualala and Westport) has an estimated 40% of the county's homeless.

The homeless population of the county is counted every two years, always on the third Thursday in January before and after dawn. The count takes place at the same time across the county so that a homeless person cannot be counted twice if they move location during the day. This is called the "Point in Time" count and it is coordinated locally through the Continuum of Care for the Homeless, called the Homeless Services Planning Group. Its purpose is to provide a coordinated and strategic approach to planning and management of a range of resources addressing the needs of families and individuals at risk of homelessness and those who are currently experiencing homelessness in Mendocino County.

Every two years, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) mandates that this Point in Time count is undertaken. In the inland, north and coastal areas of the county, community members, homeless people themselves and local agency staff band together in teams of three to count the homeless. In addition to counting individuals, a formula developed in partnership with H.U.D.'s Point in Time count model is used to ascribe a number of inhabitants to a car or an R.V.

At the time of the last count, in January 2013, the county had a total of 1,344 homeless people. Of that 1,344, 531 (39.5%) were on the coast, 282 (21%) were in and around Willits and north county, and 541 (39.5%) were in and around Ukiah and south county. Coastal homelessness includes a higher proportion of people in vehicles, campsites, R.V.'s and tents.

Surveys are conducted in addition to the count itself. In 2013, the surveys identified 157 people with serious mental illness, of whom 128 (81.5%) were on the coast. The same surveys identified 180 people in the county with substance abuse problems, of whom 145 (80.6%) were on the coast.

On June 30th 2014, the inland shelter closed, with plans to reopen by November 2014 with around half the beds. Inland agencies and faith groups have made substantial efforts to fill any gaps in shelter including working with Catholic Charities from Santa Rosa. In the meantime the coast, now with the only county homeless shelter, has seen an upturn in homeless people from inland, as recorded by sign-in sheets at the Hospitality House and Hospitality Center. The very nature of the transience makes it hard to quantify the increase from day to day, and self-report can be unreliable, but community agencies such as the Hospitality House shelter report a

noticeable increase. At community meetings, the Fort Bragg Police Department has reported a three-fold increase in calls for service related to homelessness in July and August 2014.

Coast services for the homeless and mentally ill include those of the Mendocino Coast Hospitality Center. The Hospitality Center provides different kinds of programs to help homeless and mentally ill individuals on the Coast. These include an emergency shelter, the Hospitality House. Hospitality House is a 24-bed homeless shelter which operates on a first come first served basis, with admissions taken after 4 p.m. daily. Hospitality House also provides a feeding program open to all with breakfast at 7 a.m. and dinner at 5 p.m. every day of the year. Hospitality House is located at 237 N. McPherson St, Fort Bragg, and can be reached at (707) 961-1150.

The Hospitality Center also has a variety of mental health and homelessness care and support programs operated at the Hospitality Center's location at 474 S. Franklin St, Fort Bragg; tel: (707) 961 0172. Contact the Hospitality Center for the following programs:

- **Transitional Housing** is a federal program providing 15 beds of independent living for up to two years at a property in central Fort Bragg. Transitional Housing is accessed through the Center's case management program.
- **S.T.E.P Case Management**, also known as Seamless Transition to Empowerment Program (S.T.E.P), is open to anyone over the age of 18 who is homeless and has a disability or a child.
- **Pathways** is an outreach and case management programs for people with mental illness who are homeless. It is funded through two SAMHSA (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration) grants and a Community Development Block grant, in partnership with Mendocino Coast Clinics.
- **Specialty Mental Health Services** are available for those with serious mental illness in addition to other Wellness Center services.

One of the most amazing and innovative coast projects is the Extreme Weather Shelter, entering its seventh year of operation. This shelter rotates through faith community locations when the weather is raining or below 37 degrees. The Hospitality Center coordinates the service and provides the paid supervisors; the Extreme Weather Shelter is a project of the Love in Action network. This shelter gets people inside in the worst of the weather, regardless of their level of intoxication.

Ways to improve the coast homelessness situation include new transitional housing beds, for which a grant has been awarded to buy property. The Hospitality Center and other community partners would love to develop a model called Housing First, where clients are placed in apartments immediately and the services are then wrapped around them. This is different from traditional models where clients must be stable and clean and sober to enter housing. It is a challenging model and it is not cheap! It would be wonderful to bring those who struggle most into housing.

Anybody who would like to get involved in helping the homeless on the coast is involved to:

- Contact the Hospitality Center via the website mendocinochc.org
- Attend the quarterly Love in Action meeting, at St. Michael's Church on Fir Street in Fort Bragg. The next meeting is on 1/15/15 from 10 a.m. to noon.
- Participate in the next Point in Time count on 1/22/15. This is a vital way to demonstrate our local need and attract funding and is a great community effort. Training, expenses and camaraderie are provided. For more information, contact Paul Davis at paul@mendocinochc.org or (707)961-0172.

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