

Funding sought for new approach to Marin homeless

By Richard Halstead, *Marin Independent Journal* 4/17/18



Clergy from around Marin gather for a candlelight vigil and announcement of a new housing-focused shelter program for the homeless Tuesday night at St. Raphael Catholic Church in San Rafael. James Cacciatore — Special to the Marin Independent Journal



Liz Amini brought her grandchildren Eloise and Oscar Stowell to the candlelight vigil in support of the new homeless program. James Cacciatore — Special to the Marin Independent Journal

After a decade of operation, Marin's rotating emergency shelter team program known as REST will end April 30, and housing advocates are hoping funding supporters of the program will provide the same amount of money to pursue a new approach to addressing homelessness in Marin.

The Marin Organizing Committee (MOC) held a candlelight vigil at St. Raphael's Catholic Church in San Rafael Tuesday night to rally support for the effort. Some 300 people turned out for the event.

Both Homeward Bound of Marin, which operates all of Marin's permanent homeless shelters, and St. Vincent de Paul Society of Marin, which provides meals to the homeless in addition to

housing assistance, have endorsed this new approach, which has been dubbed “housing focused” sheltering.

“‘Housing focused’ shelter is like housing first,” said Paul Fordham, Homeward Bound’s deputy director. “It’s the same principle of not trying to heal somebody first, not trying to address every one of their needs, just get them into a housing option as quickly as possible, especially the most vulnerable.”

Homeward Bound and St. Vincent de Paul Society of Marin have both made tentative plans to incorporate “housing focused” principles into their programs provided they are able to obtain the funding needed to do so.

Following the “housing focused” model, Homeward Bound began relaxing its sobriety requirements six months ago and other significant changes could also be in the offing.

“We need continued funding in order for these best practices to be put in place,” said MOC leader Pat Langley. “If that funding doesn’t come through, then this whole plan is in jeopardy.”

REST started during the winter of 2008-09 after the county of Marin was slow to provide emergency housing to the homeless when temperatures dipped into the low 30s. A winter shelter program operated from Nov. 1 to April 20, REST was managed by St. Vincent de Paul Society of Marin and operated with the assistance of some 40 churches, synagogues, and other civic organizations.

Winter program

All the religious institutions took turns cooking an evening meal for the homeless and about 17 of them allowed the homeless to sleep in their facilities on a rotating basis. Marin County provided its Health and Wellness Campus in San Rafael to house homeless women participating in the program. As of April 16, 308 people had been housed by the program this winter.

The program was funded this year by the Marin Community Foundation, which provided \$250,000, and all 11 of Marin’s municipalities, which jointly provided \$110,000. In 2015, the municipalities made a three-year pledge to help underwrite the cost.

Langley said that those involved in the REST program have become convinced that permanent housing, not temporary shelter beds, is the appropriate response to homelessness.

“Therefore, we are endorsing and advancing a new ‘housing focused’ shelter model that emphasizes permanent housing as the goal, prioritizing community resources to that end,” Langley said in a statement.

“Housing focused” sheltering is the brainchild of Iain De Jong, CEO of OrgCode Consulting Inc., a consulting firm based in Ontario, Canada. De Jong, who made a presentation to the county Board of Supervisors in March 2017, emphasizes the need for shelter support staff to maintain a laser focus on assisting clients to find housing, virtually to the exclusion of all else.

Expectations

In a blog on OrgCode's website, De Jong writes, "Shelters are shelters. They are not rehab centers. They are not health care facilities. They are not counseling centers. And yet, shelter after shelter, it seems, has gone to great lengths to add more and more programs into shelters. Part of this may be an attempt to get people 'housing ready' but increasingly we see this as therapeutic incarceration."

De Jong makes it very clear that he opposes coddling the homeless.

"No person should gain entry to shelter without knowing that it is a housing-focused shelter where there is an expectation that people will be working on permanent housing while in the shelter," he writes. "Anytime a person or family uses the shelter as an unpaid hostel rather than a shelter it is likely because the expectation of housing was not appropriately communicated at the front end."

De Jong, however, also advocates removing as many barriers as possible to admitting people to shelters, such as sobriety requirements, fees or pets.

One of the benefits of De Jong's approach is that it allows shelters to focus more attention on the chronic homeless population, which he estimates constitutes only 10 percent to 20 percent of all shelter users.

"Resources are limited," Langley said, "and we need to concentrate on those people who are the most vulnerable."

Finding housing

Ashley Hart McIntyre, Marin County's homelessness policy analyst, said since Marin County launched its new "coordinated-entry" system in October, permanent housing has been found for 30 of Marin's chronic homeless. Under the "coordinated-entry" system, clients grant permission for various agencies to share information about them to facilitate in the effort to find them appropriate housing. In some cases, the housing includes supportive services.

"The evidence from national studies makes it clear that housing focused shelter in conjunction with housing-first principles have by far the best outcomes for people experiencing homelessness," said St. Vincent de Paul Society of Marin executive director, Christine Paquette, in a statement.

Mary Kay Sweeney, Homeward Bound's executive director said she has applied to Marin County and the Marin Community Foundation for funding to implement the "housing-focused" approach at Homeward Bound's five shelters.

Currently, Homeward Bound's 80-bed facility in Novato provides basic health care, around-the-clock counseling, an on-site 12-step program for people with substance abuse issues, relapse prevention workshops and a dining room that serves three meals a day. Most people are allowed

to remain there up to six months; but must pay a daily fee of \$9. Veterans are permitted stay for up to two years.

Sobriety change

At Homeward Bound's 55-bed Mill Street facility in Mill Valley; clients must pay a \$3 daily fee and are required to leave the facility during the day at around 8 a.m. Until recently, anyone staying at either facility had to be sober.

Now, Sweeney said, "If people come to the shelter altered, as long as they are not creating a threatening environment, they can stay."

Fordham said other changes at Homeward Bound are dependent on funding from Marin Community Foundation and Marin County.

Some of the money would be used to hire a housing case manager at Mill Street and to provide training to existing staff, Sweeney said. The fee at Mill Street would be eliminated and clients would no longer be required to check out of during the day. Instead, they would be encouraged to remain and work with counselors on ways of finding alternative housing.

"In the past, we tried to work on numerous different issues with people," Fordham said, "and now we want to become laser focused on how will this help forward your housing."