

TMHA in the News

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Homeless advocates seek solutions

By Sam Womack

On any given night in Santa Barbara County, an estimated 4,000 people are sleeping without a safe shelter.

They stand on corners with tattered cardboard signs silently shouting their need, and snatch some sleep in vehicles or vacant buildings, or beneath bridges and overpasses.

Homelessness is an issue that many are able to ignore, but there are a few people in the county who spend every day staring into the eyes of the men, women and children who have no home, and vowing to make a difference.

On Wednesday, those shelter managers, mental-health advocates, drug- and alcohol-abuse counselors and nonprofit organization directors met with community housing corporations to better understand each other's roles in ending chronic homelessness, and celebrate the progress that has been made.

"We've never done this before, where we explain what each organization does, and what we need — what we have to work with," said Sylvia Barnard, executive director of the Good Samaritan Shelter in Santa Maria and Lompoc.

She also is the leadership council co-chair of the countywide effort known as "Bringing Our Community Home: The Ten-Year Plan to End Chronic Homelessness."

"This conference helped to keep the kernel, the light, the grail of housing in focus. People who are destitute, disabled and homeless have no hope. The medicine of housing is remarkable," said Frank Ricceri, associate director of Transitions Mental Health Association, which recently completed Homebase on G in Lompoc, a 39-unit housing complex for mentally ill, homeless residents.

Transitions partnered with Santa Barbara Housing Assistance Corp. to fund and construct the new, affordable development that includes supportive services.

More than 150 people attended the conference held at the Buellton Marriott, and all appeared to take advantage of the unique networking opportunity.

Providers of homeless services, such as mental-health programs, alcohol and drug detox, and shelters, have noticed that their clients often don't qualify for affordable housing, Barnard said.

"They can't have been convicted of a crime, or have any previous evictions, and they need good credit. That makes it hard for a lot of our shelter residents," Barnard said.

Housing corporation representatives with the Santa Barbara Housing Assistance Corp. and the Housing Authority of Santa Barbara County (HASBC) explained that they often have to follow rules set by their public and private funding sources.

“Service providers are concerned with the individual, but we have to think of the housing complex as a whole, we can’t have one individual disrupting the rest of the residents,” said John Polansky, director of housing development for HASBC.

“I think a lot of service providers thought our rules were arbitrary, but it depends on who funds us,” he added.

The conference consisted of about a dozen presentations on affordable-housing developments, and homeless programs and services, followed by some group discussion and collaboration among providers,

The education and increased understanding of everyone’s role in ending chronic homelessness and affordable housing was a precursor to a Bringing Our Community Home housing summit in October.

At that time, Barnard said, she hoped interested community members would attend along with the homeless service professionals to discuss chronic homeless solutions.

For more information on the conference, resources or the upcoming summit, visit www.bringsbcohome.org

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