

SANTA ROSA DECLARES A HOMELESSNESS EMERGENCY

Good Intentions – Limited Results

SUMMARY

2,906 homeless in Sonoma County

Two thousand nine hundred and six homeless persons lived in Sonoma County last year according to the annual Housing and Urban Development (HUD) report on homelessness. A little more than 40% of those people lived in Santa Rosa.

The City of Santa Rosa has been actively fighting homelessness among its citizens since the 1990s. On August 9, 2016, the Santa Rosa City Council passed an Emergency Declaration to address the current plight of unsheltered homeless people living in Santa Rosa. The purpose of this Declaration was to increase sheltering options for homeless people by loosening enforcement of certain building codes and zoning regulations that are physical and financial barriers to providing safe shelter.

The Civil Grand Jury chose to investigate the impact of that Declaration within the city of Santa Rosa during the winter of 2016-2017. We found that the Declaration had very little impact on housing for the unsheltered homeless in Santa Rosa during that period.

The Civil Grand Jury also found that the City of Santa Rosa continues to be committed to finding ways to provide shelter for the unsheltered homeless in the city. The Santa Rosa City Council voted in January 2017 to approve a Housing First Strategy and Fiscal Year 2016/2017 Work Plan to expand the City's battle against homelessness.

BACKGROUND

This is a self-initiated investigation by the 2016-17 Civil Grand Jury.

Unsheltered homeless are persons living on the street, in abandoned buildings, cars, vans and RVs or in encampment areas. Sheltered homeless are persons living in emergency shelters or transitional housing.

A global survey by the United Nations 11 years ago estimated that worldwide 100 million people were homeless and that 1.6 billion people lacked adequate housing. The Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) reported that there were 564,708 homeless people in the United States in January of 2016. 115,738 or 20%, of the nation's homeless lived in California, 2,906 homeless lived in Sonoma County and 1,200 (41%) of them lived in Santa Rosa without shelter. Of these 82% lived in Santa

Rosa before becoming homeless. The 2017 official count of the homeless in Sonoma County has been conducted but has not yet been made available.

METHODOLOGY

The Civil Grand Jury interviewed Santa Rosa city officials and a representative from the First United Methodist Church, a congregation that made shelter sites available, regarding the Emergency Declaration.

The Civil Grand Jury attended or reviewed the videos of the Santa Rosa City Council meetings and the sub-committee meetings on homelessness for the relevant discussions regarding the Declaration.

The Civil Grand Jury compared the number of shelter beds and safe parking or camping spaces available before, and during a six month period after, the Declaration. Members of the Civil Grand Jury attended a two-day Summit on Housing Solutions.

The Civil Grand Jury also reviewed documents and on line resources listed in the Bibliography.

DISCUSSION

The California Emergency Services Act (CESA) empowers the State to issue Emergency Declarations in order to preserve lives and property, and to protect public health and safety. This legislation was crafted to address natural disasters, wars, and outbreaks of infectious diseases that overwhelm local government resources. It has also been interpreted to include homelessness.

CESA also allows local governments, like the City of Santa Rosa to declare an emergency. Such a Declaration triggers relief from any liability when local officials are exercising their official duties to address the emergency. Any Emergency Declaration must be confirmed by the City Council within seven days, and must be renewed every thirty days as long as the emergency exists.

Cotati and the cities of San Diego, Portland, Seattle and Los Angeles have all passed Emergency Declarations regarding homelessness. Like Santa Rosa, these local governments focused on relaxing enforcement of building and zoning codes.

The City of Santa Rosa has supported services for the homeless since the 1990s through its Public Service Program. The Samuel L. Jones Hall Homeless Shelter has been owned by the City and operated by Catholic Charities since 2005. City departments coordinate services provided to the homeless. The City Council has a Homeless Policy

Subcommittee, sponsors a street outreach team and has budgeted \$1.7 million for homeless services for the current 2016-17 fiscal year.

These services include the Samuel L. Jones Homeless Shelter, Homeless Outreach Team (HOST) and support to the Sonoma County Continuum of Care. Additional money has also been budgeted for the administration of these programs. In February 2017, the City Council approved a supplemental \$125,000 to HOST for rapid re-housing resources in support of approximately 25 families.

The City participates in the regional Sonoma County Continuum of Care, a stream of grant funding from the Federal Department of Housing and Urban Development that is dedicated to ending homelessness. The Continuum of Care brings close to \$3 million per year to Sonoma County to end homelessness.

The City Council passed the Emergency Declaration to give the City additional flexibility in addressing the issue of homelessness. The City Council hoped that the Declaration would engage community support for shared, long-term solutions.

There are three features contained in the Santa Rosa Emergency Declaration:

- a declaration of a shelter crisis,
- a declaration of a local emergency and
- a request for the governor to declare an emergency on homelessness in California.

These features were intended to allow the City to relax certain health, safety and zoning rules (such as permits for “granny” units) to create additional shelter and to lift zoning or public safety restrictions on private property. This Declaration also allowed the City to apply for State funding, if it was available.

A shortage of affordable housing has been an issue in Sonoma County for years. The County, along with the City of Santa Rosa, has a ten-year plan for creating over 4,000 new or renovated housing units to resolve the existing housing shortage and homelessness in the County. This plan is outlined in a document entitled [Policy Makers Tool Box for Ending Homelessness in Sonoma County](#). In spite of the apparent cooperative approach in dealing with homelessness that is laid out in this document, it is difficult to determine what specific joint City/County programs are in place to help the homeless person on the street.

The focus of the Santa Rosa Declaration is the Community Homeless Assistance Program (CHAP). This program allows property owners to use their properties for safe parking, camping, the placement of portable toilets or access to bathroom facilities, provisions of temporary overnight shelters, and storage for personal belongings. Such properties

must meet the city's zoning definition for a "meeting facility". These properties are typically meeting halls of churches, granges, and community centers.

In the past, CHAP was only operational during the winter, but it is now authorized year-round as a result of the Declaration. Prospective participants must register their property at City Hall with the Department of Housing and Community Services.

Available Housing

Available housing includes emergency shelters, transitional housing and safe parking places in the County that are offered by non-governmental organizations that receive funds primarily from the Federal government.

As of May 2016, before the Emergency Declaration was declared, there were 407 year-round beds available in Santa Rosa. An additional 90 beds are available during the winter (Appendix A).

The purpose of relaxing building and zoning codes was to encourage owners of property defined as "meeting facilities" to participate in a year-round CHAP program by making temporary overnight shelter available. Only one such organization, the First United Methodist Church, has offered to participate in this program.

Six months after the Declaration of Homelessness Emergency only 19 beds were added:

- The First United Methodist Church on Giffen Avenue in Santa Rosa submitted a proposal to provide up to twenty tents at their Giffen Avenue campus. CHAP, approved by the City Council, specifically allows for this camping program. The original proposal for twenty tents was reduced to four tents as a result of neighborhood concerns.
- Social Advocates for Youth (SAY) made up to 15 additional beds available in downtown Santa Rosa for youth aged 18 to 24. Legal access to these beds was achieved within days. The typical permitting process would normally take months before this shelter was available. Funding for the program is being provided by Sonoma County through its winter shelter expansion program.

Other resources were considered but proved unworkable or are still under study. These include:

- Unused portable classrooms were scheduled to be moved to Samuel Jones Hall to provide rapid shelter capacity. These portable classrooms are no longer available.

- The National Guard Armory management reached out to local service providers seeking interest in overnight shelter operations. No proposals have been received and the City Council has dropped this approach.
- The Veteran’s Building is owned by the County and the County indicated that the building and the parking lot are not available for use as a temporary shelter.
- Former Fire Station 5 is being assessed for use as a temporary shelter.

Barriers to Providing Shelters for the Homeless

Members of Santa Rosa City government have expressed disappointment in the level of cooperation from the Sonoma County Board of Supervisors in dealing with homelessness. They point to the empty buildings on Chanate and the Veteran’s Building that could have been used as temporary housing, especially during the worst of the winter weather.

Zoning and building code requirements are not the only barriers to addressing homelessness. Identifying suitable properties is a challenge for community leaders. Neighborhood concerns are a recurring obstacle for those charged with addressing homelessness. Attempts to use locations that allow reasonable access to community amenities, such as shops and services, can result in community resistance. Relocating homeless people in proximity to residential areas or schools also raised concerns.

FINDINGS

- F1. Homelessness is a county-wide issue.
- F2. The City of Santa Rosa is actively involved in and committed to responding to the problems of homelessness.
- F3. The Declaration of Homelessness Emergency has not resulted in any significant increase in sheltering options for the homeless.
- F4. The City of Santa Rosa believes that it can achieve better collaboration and cooperation with the County on homeless issues.
- F5. The Methodist Church proposal to offer up to twenty tent sites was whittled back to four, in large part because of neighborhood objections.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- R1. By September 30, 2017, the City of Santa Rosa shall commit to continue to renew the Declaration of Homeless Emergency every 30 days, at least through Winter 2017-18. (F2)
- R2. The City of Santa Rosa should formally engage the County to implement the multifaceted Tool Box approach. (F1 & F4)
- R3. The Sonoma County Board of Supervisors should commit to making the Chanate site available for homeless services until its sale is completed and should solicit proposals from local homeless service entities for managing the facilities. (F3 & F4))
- R4. The Sonoma County Board of Supervisors should commit to making at least a portion of the parking area at the Veterans Building available for CHAP. (F3 & F4)
- R5 By September 30, 2017, the City of Santa Rosa should develop an action plan to work more preemptively with local residents to welcome homeless services. (F5)

REQUIRED RESPONSES

Pursuant to Penal code section 933.05, the grand jury requires responses as follows:

R1, R2 & R5: Santa Rosa City Council

R3 & R4: Sonoma County Board of Supervisors

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Santa Rosa City Council Minutes of August 9, 2016
- Santa Rosa City Council Minutes of February 7, 2017
- Santa Rosa City Council Minutes of February 14, 2017
- Agenda, Board of Supervisors, February 21. 2017
- Material issued for the Summit on Homeless Solutions, January 30-31, 2017
- Sonoma County Continuum of Care, 10-Year Homeless Action Plan, 2014 Plan Update
- City of Santa Rosa, Homelessness Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)
- Sonoma County Request for Proposals, Pilot Project to Safely Shelter Homeless People
- Sonoma County Community Development Commission. Building HOMES: A Policy Maker's Toolbox for Ending Homelessness, September 2015.

APPENDIX A

The breakdown of available shelter before the Emergency Declaration is as follows:

- 138 Family Support Center
- 13 Nightingale House (Brookwood)
- 13 Nightingale House (Samuel Jones Hall)
- 120 Samuel Jones Hall
- 50 Samuel Jones Hall - seasonal
- 22 Sloan House
- 13 Opportunity House (for the seriously mentally ill)
- 4 HCHV/EH – Turning Point
- 40 Nomadic Shelter - seasonal
- 40 Redwood Gospel Mission Men’s shelter
- 26 The Rose Women’s Shelter
- 6 Coffee House Teen Shelter
- 12 Dream Center Short Term (Transitional Age Youth)
- 497 Total

Safe parking in Santa Rosa before the Emergency Declaration numbered 69 spots:

- 50 spots: County Complex
- 5 spots: Knox Presbyterian on Third Street
- 4 spots: Congregation Shomrei Torah on Bennet Valley Road
- 5 spots: Brookwood Health Center
- 3 spots: Church of Incarnation on Mendocino Avenue
- 2 spots: First United Methodist Church on Giffen Avenue. at Stony Point Road
- 69 Total

Reports issued by the Civil Grand Jury do not identify individuals interviewed. Penal Code Section 929 requires that reports of the Grand Jury not contain the name of any person or facts leading to the identity of any person who provides information to the Civil Grand Jury.
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