

Santa Cruz Homeless Services Center opens new recovery care unit

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SANTA CRUZ -- After years with nowhere to turn once released from a hospital or nursing facility, homeless patients now can recover inside a facility opening Monday on the Homeless Services Center campus.

City and county officials joined advocates for the homeless and local medical providers Friday in celebrating the 12-bed Homeless Recuperative Care Center, a 24-hour shelter that will provide care for those referred by medical providers and hospice or social workers. The average length of stay is expected to be six weeks.

The program includes medical care by the Homeless Persons Health Project, as well as meals, housekeeping, case management, transportation and treatment or support for substance abuse or mental health issues. Brief stays before medical procedures occasionally may be allowed.

Saying "there is no distinction between those who are the deserving homeless and those who are not," Monica Martinez, director of the Homeless Services Center, said, "It's not OK for any individual while they are in their most vulnerable state to be left to recover outside without care and compassion."

Martinez said she hopes "here in our community our people will have that type of health care access and that this will be the first step in a path to housing for our most vulnerable neighbors."

Launched in August, the \$1.9 million project included renovation of the adjacent Page Smith Community House, an 18-month transitional housing program for 40 people. The project largely was funded through state and federal sources, though private donors also contributed.

Annual operational costs for the care center are estimated at \$260,000 and will be funded with contributions from the Santa Cruz County Health Services Agency, Dignity Health, Healthy Improvement Partnership, Hospice of Santa Cruz County and Watsonville Community Hospital. Modeled after programs in Los Angeles and Seattle, the facility is designed to prevent repeated hospitalizations and emergency room visits.

"This center will keep the cost of health care down," said Nanette Mickiewicz, president of Dominican Hospital.

The most recent census of homeless people in the county identified 989 people who are chronically homeless. Thirty-seven homeless people have died so far this year in the county, officials said.

"It's going to be so transformative," Santa Cruz Mayor Lynn Robinson said of the facility, thanking the Homeless Services Center for bringing the proposal to City Hall for approval. The center leases its Coral Street property from the city.

The facility is but one step in a new evidence-based approach by Martinez to reduce homelessness. The center is also a participant in the local 180-180 campaign to identify permanent housing by July for 180 of

the most vulnerable homeless people in the county, which to date has housed 118.

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