

# Hunger Strike in Santa Cruz

## One Man's Stand to Improve Conditions for the Homeless Community

by Becky Johnson

**Y**ou'd walk right by him, and not even notice. He didn't even have a sign. As he sat on his backpack, rigged into a semi-comfy seat on the steps of the main post office in Santa Cruz, and with his bedroll nearby for his visiting guests, you would never have thought that this man was engaged in a fight to the death.

He was on a fast until services for homeless people in Santa Cruz at the Homeless Services Center (HSC) were improved or until he died. "There will be one of two outcomes," the man explained in his gentlemanly Southern drawl. "There's no doubt I prefer the former."

Lou Rice, a 51-year-old client of the Homeless Services Center, isn't from Santa Cruz. He came here in January from Savannah, Georgia, and until April 15, he slept in the HSC's Interfaith Satellite Shelter Program (ISSP). Most of those nights were spent up at the armory, where up to 137 people are housed under one roof on winter nights. On occasion, he slept in ISSP-participating churches. The process starts by waiting in line for a bus at 4 p.m. to get a night's sleep. It ends with a rude awakening next morning at 5:30 a.m. by a staff member ordering everyone to get up and stand in line once again to wait for an exit bus.

The Homeless Services Center at 115 Coral Street in Santa Cruz is where clients take showers, get mail, wash clothes, keep stuff in lockers, get to use phones, and twice a day get fed by the Free Meal.

Last July, the Homeless Community Resource Center merged with a nonprofit organization, the Citizens Committee for the Homeless, and with that merger, now runs the ISSP, the only temporary, emergency shelter for homeless people in northern Santa Cruz County. The newly opened Page Smith Community House, serving 40 clients, was also part of the merger.

The HSC has a budget of about \$1.5 million from federal, state, county, city, and private donations. But, according to Rice, very little of that money reaches the homeless clients.

"Most of the money goes to staff salaries and buildings," Rice charges. "Donations of food and clothing are picked over by staff members before any of the homeless get to see them." Many people have made these claims for years.

"The quality of food is criminally negligent," he continues. "The conditions in which it is prepared are unsanitary. Powdered milk is mixed in the same sink the mop buckets are put in. And there is not enough food to feed everyone."

Breakfast at the HSC's Free Meal is Spartan, at best. On one recent morning, breakfast was one small cup of oatmeal, margarine, and white sugar, with black coffee. There were no seconds. Piles of donated sugar donuts along with hard bagels and stale bread were available in abundance, but there were few takers. A large percentage of homeless clients have severe dental prob-



Alene Smith photo

Santa Cruz protester denounces the sleeping ban.