

More Hardships Than Ever

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counted in Santa Cruz County; and 1273 were counted in the City of Santa Cruz alone. When a multiplier based on the average length of time a person is homeless is used, the estimate of the number of people who will experience homelessness in a single year in Santa Cruz County swells to 8,558. More people than ever live on the streets in extreme poverty.

More than ever. And all experts agree: this is an undercount.

Comparison to the 1990 homeless census shows that the demographics have changed in four areas: more families, youth, employed persons and women have been displaced. The group described as "chronically homeless" has increased as well, to 32 percent.

Another myth, that homeless people receive a lot of government benefits, was also dispelled. In reality, 39 percent of homeless people receive NO government assistance whatsoever, while 28 percent do not receive adequate health care.

During the head count, 1123 people were counted in some type of shelter. These included those in jail, in the hospital or mental health unit, in a drug or alcohol rehab facility, as well as in shelters. Another 982 homeless people (30 percent) were found living in their cars. And 626 people had no shelter at all. Thirty percent reported they don't get enough food to eat.

The 2000 Homeless Census and Needs Assessment Survey have shown that shelter is needed more than ever. Jane Wade of the Pajaro Valley Shelter Services reports: "We are not able to serve even a third of those seeking shelter."

The executive summary can be read at www.appliedsurveyresearch.org

Beach Flats Affordable Housing Update

Residentes Unidos activists in Santa Cruz suffered several serious setbacks after a high point of organizational strength this summer. [See *Street Spirit*, August, 2000, "Taking a Stand Against the Bulldozers and Evictors."]

Residents of the Dolphin and Lee Apartments were struggling to get the Santa Cruz City Council to pass legal guarantees of assured relocation and return, before they were handed over to the monopoly nonprofit Mercy Housing Corporation (previously Mercy Charities Housing) for demolition and rebuilding.

Mercy Housing continued to meet behind closed doors, spurning tenant requests for open meetings (and prompting one lawsuit from activist Robert Norse). On July 25, the City Council voted to sever the activist Lee tenants from the proposed redevelopment project, relieving Lee tenants for the moment, but demoralizing the more vulnerable Dolphin residents in a rather cynical "divide and conquer" strategy.

To avoid controversy in the fall elections, City Council candidates ran for cover, skipping a Beach Flats Fiesta and a televised forum on the issue. Mercy backers on SCAN, the Santa Cruz Action Network, whose "progressive" machine has elected most City Councilmembers recently, pulled political strings, dissolved the activist Housing Committee and disaffiliated itself from the forum. Violating a late-spring mandate voted by the SCAN

membership to support the demands of the Dolphin and Lee tenants.

In October, Mayor Keith Sugar, who had repeatedly promised never to vote to acquire the Dolphin for Mercy Housing until it had a clear and person-by-person relocation plan, joined a unanimous vote to buy it for \$1.5 million without any such plan. In private, he admitted that he couldn't find the relevant relocation law and that "not everyone who lives there will be able to return."

Two weeks later, Sugar supported a second unanimous vote that approved the bulldozing of 15 family housing units nearby without a written building inspector's report. A third vote a week later at a special Halloween-day council meeting awarded a \$1.5 million, 30-year loan at 0% interest to Mercy Housing (with indications that the "loan" would be turned into a grant at some point) to buy the Dolphin outright.

No legally binding guarantees were ever made that the 200-plus low-income, Spanish-speaking residents, many of them undocumented, would have adequate housing or be able to return to the smaller number of units that will be built after the demolition. No materials were released in Spanish in the rush to vote before the November election.

The televised forum, which included a one-hour documentary called "Promise or Promises?" exposed the City Council's machinations around the Dolphin-Lee project. Activists vowed to carefully monitor any evictions from the Dolphin under Mercy management. As of late November, no one reportedly had been evicted, though Mercy did require all the tenants to sign new leases. The latest report from a source close to the mayor is that Mercy is now planning on rebuilding

only 19 units to replace the 47 it will destroy in the name of affordable housing.

"Boxer" Billy Found Frozen to Death

Also in Beach Flats, the body of "Boxer" Billy Denson was found in the early morning hours of November 11th, in a carport. Boxer Billy, a legless man confined to a wheelchair, had been a long-time homeless resident in Santa Cruz. He had lost his legs when, as he lay on the ground passed out from alcohol, a man poured gasoline on his legs and set him afire. Although prosecutors knew the man that had burned Billy, he was never prosecuted for that crime.

"I fed him breakfast on the morning the day before he died," said his friend John. "He was fine." Billy's death marks the fifth homeless death in two months. Two suicides by hanging, two overdoses, and now an apparent death by hypothermia have hit the homeless community. No official count of homeless deaths is tallied; the Santa Cruz County Coroner keeps no statistics on homeless deaths.

In spite of unseasonably freezing temperatures at night, the Santa Cruz City Council took no action to open the Armory Winter Shelter early or lift the Sleeping, Blanket, and Camping Bans. The Santa Cruz County Board of Supervisors has refused to allow homeless people to sleep in any of the spacious unused county parking lots.

Sleeping in vehicles and outside remains a crime on public property in both the city and county. Several groups are planning mass protests to pressure public officials to restore the right of homeless people to shelter themselves without criminal penalties.