

## Marin's homeless thankful for shelter program, now in its ninth year

By [Richard Halstead](#), Marin Independent Journal

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*Donna Lynn, left, who has a place to sleep thanks to the REST program, chats with Laurie Sachs, a student at the San Francisco Theological Seminary, after dinner Tuesday. Lynn was among 15 women who were served by the REST program Tuesday night.  
Jocelyn Knight -Special to the Marin Independent Journal*

It rained and temperatures dipped into the low 40s Tuesday night in San Rafael. But some 50 homeless individuals had a dry place to sleep and a hot meal, and this week they were giving thanks for the county's rotating emergency shelter program, known as REST.

"It's nice," said Linda Ringor, 58, who is without a home again after exhausting her allotted six-month stay at Homeward Bound's New Beginnings Center in Novato. "We sleep on the floor; but we get a blanket. We get a mat. We get food."

Ringor was among 15 women who were served by the REST program Tuesday; women are housed at the county's Health and Wellness Campus in San Rafael. About a dozen religious institutions in Marin take turns allowing homeless men to sleep in their buildings. A total of 42 churches, synagogues and other civic organizations also will participate in the program this winter by preparing evening meals for the people being hosted.

On Tuesday, 35 men spent the night at The Quest in Novato, a Christian church with loose ties to the American Baptist Churches of the West and the Southern Baptist Convention. The REST program, which runs from Nov. 1 to April 30, can accommodate up to 40 men and 20 women per night. Last year, 311 homeless individuals participated.

Rev. Alison Hendley of the San Rafael First United Methodist Church, which has participated in REST since its inception nine years ago, said, “The thing that surprises me is how many elderly women there are in the program. It breaks my heart that these women, many of whom are seniors with a mental illness, have nowhere else to be.”

Ringor said she initially became homeless in 2011 when her daughter and a friend decided to paint a wall in the house they were renting.

“The place we were staying at you could not paint the wall or write on the wall so we lost the house,” Ringor said. “Then I was with my son. We went from living in a hotel for a while to living under a bridge.”

Ringor said she finally sought housing at New Beginnings after all of her belongings were stolen.

Another participant in the program on Tuesday, Kaiser Alexander, 60, said, “I’ve been homeless 15 years.”

Alexander said she became homeless after her mother died.

“I became homeless because I couldn’t believe my mother was dead,” Alexander said. “I couldn’t accept it.”

Debbie Riches, 67, said she became homeless after her husband died two years ago. Riches, who grew up in San Rafael, recalls working as a bunny at the Playboy Club in San Francisco when she was 19.

Riches said the \$800 a month in Supplemental Security Income that she receives from the state isn’t enough to pay for housing.

Donna Lynn, 60, said, “I basically left with the clothes on my back from a very bad marriage. Lots of drug abuse. I didn’t want it anymore, and I just left.”

Lynn said she moved to Marin from Santa Barbara eight years ago to be closer to her children; but she can’t live with them.

“My life is too chaotic for the children,” said Lynn, who has battled an addiction to methamphetamine. Lynn said she was misdiagnosed as being bipolar and took medications to treat that condition for 15 years before stopping recently. Last year, Lynn spent some time at New Beginnings and plans to seek re-admittance there.

“I want nothing more than to be wholesome; that’s my goal,” Lynn said. “No more drama.”

Barbara Fahy, 64, said she hasn’t been able to find a place to rent after spending six months at New Beginnings.

“I spent a few weeks on friends’ couches,” Fahy said, “but it was getting to me, and I’m sure it was getting to them.”

Fahy worked for Wells Fargo Bank for 28 years as a secretary, a technical writer and a program manager. She receives a small pension from the bank in addition to Social Security.

Asked how she became homeless, Fahy says, “It involves ex-husbands and bad decisions. Just basically a lot of bad decisions.”

Her son, a 30-year-old veteran of the Iraq war, has housing in San Francisco thanks to a Veterans Affairs Supportive Housing voucher. He would have to make Fahy his primary dependent for her to live with him, which would prevent him from housing his own family should he marry.

Fahy said, “It takes everything he can do to keep body and soul together.”

Libbie Rilla, 74, said she grew up in Mill Valley and Kentfield. Asked how she became homeless, she replied, “That’s a good question. I’m trying to figure that out myself.”

This is the ninth consecutive year that Marin’s religious community has collaborated with St. Vincent de Paul Society of Marin County to provide the REST program.

“It feels like it falls a lot on the faith communities to be doing the work,” Hendley said. “I believe we represent about 2 to 3 percent of the population in Marin.”

The program is funded by the Marin Community Foundation, which provides \$250,000, and all 11 of Marin’s municipalities, which jointly provide \$110,000. Last year the municipalities made a three-year pledge to help underwrite the cost.

Mill Street, which has 50 beds and five “overflow mats,” is the county’s only permanent emergency shelter. To get housing at Homeward Bound’s New Beginnings Center in Novato, which has 80 beds, homeless individuals must first enter Homeward Bound’s system through Mill Street.

Mill Street has been running at capacity for more than a month, said Jerry Green, an interim director there.

The Marin Organizing Committee, the group of nonprofits and religious organizations that helped create REST, has sought to expand the winter shelter program into a year-round, permanent new homeless shelter, but it has so far been unable to find a politically viable site.

“I’m very disappointed,” Hendley said. “It just seems like we keep getting round blocks everywhere.”

But Pat Langley, a parishioner at St. Anselm Church in Ross, said the committee hasn’t abandoned the goal of finding a permanent home for REST.

“We haven’t run out of gas,” Langley said.

Langley said that earlier this year the committee gathered the signatures of 8,500 Marin residents who support the creation of a new year-round shelter for the homeless. And Langley said the committee also secured pledges of support from Dennis Rodoni, who was elected to the Marin County Board of Supervisors on Nov. 8, and supervisors Kate Sears and Katie Rice, who secured re-election in June.

Langley said the committee has also been talking with Grant Colfax, director of the county Department of Health and Human Services, about the possibility of providing additional services to REST participants this year to help prepare them for entering permanent housing.

Meredith Parnell, a member of Congregation Rodef Sholom and a Marin Organizing Committee leader, said, “People say they care about homelessness; but then they say not-in-my-backyard to any kind of housing. That is what is frustrating to me.

“We talk about it as if homelessness and housing and traffic were all separate issues when they’re all connected issues,” she said. “Traffic is a by-product of not enough housing.”