

NEWS

Editorial: Marin cities can help finance homeless shelter



Reggie Johnson unrolls his sleeping bag and belongings at the spot he will call home for the night during the final night of the winter homeless shelter program, at Rodef Sholom, in San Rafael, Calif., on Wednesday night, March 31, 2010. (IJ photo/Jeff Vendsel) Jeff Vendsel

By **MARIN INDEPENDENT JOURNAL** |

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When it comes to helping the homeless in Marin, the Marin Organizing Committee has certainly paid its dues. For the past six years, the faith- and nonprofits-based coalition has run Marin's emergency homeless shelter that has rotated among host churches.

Parish members have volunteered their time to serve as hosts, cooks, servers and counselors to the some 360 men and women who found a safe, dry and warm respite thanks to the program.

Their program was supposed to be a stop-gap, providing nightly shelters during the winter months until the county could open its own emergency shelter. Marin was fortunate that volunteers stepped forward to provide space, staff and support for the winter program. But six years later, the county isn't much closer to opening a permanent shelter, despite officials' pledges.

And Marin Organizing Committee leaders and volunteers have run out of patience.

They are taking their cause beyond the politics of the county Civic Center and San Rafael City Hall.

They are going city to city and asking local councils to not only support the creation of a new permanent shelter, but to help pay for running it.

Last week, committee leaders approached the San Anselmo Town Council.

On Aug. 6, they plan to speak at the Fairfax Town Council meeting and on Sept. 3, they will be on the Tiburon Town Council's agenda.

Their goal is to build countywide support for the shelter.

Homelessness in Marin is a countywide issue, not just the county's, San Rafael's or Novato's.

Marin's two permanent shelters may be in San Rafael and Novato, but the people who stay there every night are from across the county.

Those 135 beds are full almost every night and during winter months those men and women who couldn't get in those two programs could find a cot and a blanket at the rotating shelter.

When the rotating shelter closed in April, they were back on the streets, sleeping in cars, under stairwells, in warrens carved out between bushes and buildings and in open spaces. If compassion and social responsibility are not motivation enough, recent wildland fires started by homeless encampments are good reasons why Marin needs another permanent shelter.



“We feel strongly that homelessness is a countywide issue and needs a countywide solution,” Meredith Parnell, a committee spokeswoman, said.

The county and San Rafael have made the same argument. The recent formation of a countywide homeless task force with representation from every Marin city should help inform local leaders about the need and challenges.

The two biggest hurdles have been cost and location.

County officials, until recently, have questioned whether shelter programs really address the problem and help people out of the cycle of homelessness. That’s a fair question to ask, but not at the expense of people left without shelter.

The committee estimates a shelter will cost \$1.2 million to run year-round and it is asking municipalities to share in covering 20 percent of that cost.

In San Anselmo, that cost would be \$19,700 per year.

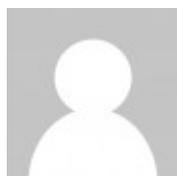
San Rafael officials are weary of being Marin’s hub for shelter beds and homeless services.

Mayor Gary Phillips has softened his earlier stand that a new shelter would need to be located in another city. He says the city is looking at two county properties in San Rafael, the Health and Wellness Campus on Kerner Boulevard and the Marin Commons office park on Los Gamos Drive.

Progress is slow and frustrating, as the hurdles are the same that stood in the way six years ago.

Last year, Phillips and Larry Meredith, the director of county Health and Human Services, made a public pledge that they would work together to open a new permanent shelter.

Marin Organizing Committee’s leadership and involvement are needed to help them keep that promise.



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