Marin Voice: In support of ‘housing first,’ supervisors should push for Larkspur Homekey site

By LINDA HAUMANN and ROBERT PENDOLEY  |  February 2, 2022 at 12:49 p.m.

The Marin Organizing Committee has a long history of advocating for those experiencing homelessness.

For more than a decade, MOC’s Rotating Emergency Shelter Team program provided nightly meals, shelter and community during the winter months at its member churches and synagogues — transforming all participants (volunteers as well as guests) in the process and reaffirming our commitment to social justice.

The most common comment from new volunteers after each dinner was “they are just like us.” Volunteers learned how a health issue, accident, job loss, divorce, rent increase or other problems could move an individual from living in a home to living on the streets, in open space or in their cars.
The longer MOC organizers supported REST, the more involved they became in working toward a better solution. Leaders recognized that providing temporary shelter was not a real solution to this crisis and lobbied the county to develop a year-round shelter and a coordinated program to provide permanent housing (including the collection of 8,000 signature cards supporting permanent homes). MOC ended the program in 2017, challenging county officials to step up to address this issue.

A collaboration of nonprofit providers (including the St. Vincent de Paul Society, Homeward Bound, Ritter Center and Buckelew), with support from county leaders, the Marin Community Foundation and the City of San Rafael, emerged to launch a “housing first” strategy to address homelessness. It recognizes that no one can be expected to get clean and sober, manage a chronic illness or follow-through with mental health care without stable housing.

Since 2017, the county has housed more than 400 formerly homeless individuals with a 95% retention rate. We congratulate those organizations, as well as county officials, for their willingness to think inside and outside their institutions for solutions, one individual at a time.
However, Marin lacks sufficient affordable units to provide supportive housing to the chronically homeless who need it. MOC leaders realize our work is not done.

The availability of funding for supportive housing units, through the first round of Project Homekey funding, allowed the creation of 19 units in Corte Madera and 44 units in San Rafael in 2020. Now we have the opportunity to create approximately 43 additional units at the former nursing home at 1251 South Eliseo Drive in Larkspur.

Marin’s last homeless count showed more than 1,000 unhoused people, and that was pre-pandemic.

The Episcopal Community Services has been chosen to oversee the Larkspur site. The services will include intensive case management, behavioral health services, workforce development and benefits assistance. There will be 24/7 front desk staff and property management on site. There will also be a safety team to be the eyes and ears outside the facility in order to prevent any issues before they arise.

Naturally, neighbors have questions and worries. Numerous informational sessions have taken place. An advisory board, which includes concerned neighbors who are willing to work to make sure their concerns are addressed, has been established.
There are concerns about the cost of housing those living on the streets. Yet, each year, our community is already footing the bill for emergency services. They include ambulance and medical services, increased police and fire calls, as well as hospital stays.

There are environmental impacts as well. Since public restrooms and trash receptacles are limited, and because many businesses prohibit the homeless from accessing restrooms, homeless people are forced to use whatever location they can find to dispose of their trash and other waste. This phenomenon results in a public health hazard and contributes to additional city costs. In fact, it is a financial savings to have people move into housing.

No one should live on our streets. Homelessness is detrimental to our community, disempowers those experiencing it and affects the quality of our community life and accessibility to public space.

“Housing first” works here in Marin. The Marin Organizing Committee member institutions strongly encourage supervisors to approve the Larkspur Homekey site once we have received state funding approval.