

Back on their feet

COMMUNITY SERVICES AGENCY HAS PROVIDED ASSISTANCE TO THE REGION'S POOR FOR HALF A CENTURY

By Theresa Condon

Untold thousands of people have walked through the doors of Mountain View's Community Services Agency during its 50 years of operation, and come out with renewed hope.

For people like Patricia, who came to CSA several years ago after losing her job, the organization has made every effort to help. Although medical

problems prevented her from returning to the workforce and she had no way to support herself and her son, through CSA's emergency assistance program she was able to provide food, school supplies and even holiday presents for her son. The agency also helped pay her rent until other assistance was approved.

Stories like Patricia's are common, which is why CSA is so essential for the poorer residents of Mountain View, Los Altos and Los Altos Hills.

"Here in this community, we are the safety net to make sure people don't fall through the cracks," said executive director Tom Myers.

This safety net includes a broad range of services, from food and nutrition counseling to financial assistance. The three core programs of CSA — emergency assistance, senior services and "Alpha Omega" homeless services — address the specific needs of down-on-their-luck individuals in the community.

The emergency program provides immediate relief for clients who suddenly find themselves in need of food, supplies and financial assistance. Clients who qualify are allowed to "shop" at CSA's well-stocked "Food and Nutrition Center," which has baskets and shelves full of fresh produce, bread, noodles and canned goods for clients to take free of charge.

Through this center, CSA emphasizes healthy food choices and offers nutritional counseling in order to lower the rate of obesity in poor families. Also, one-time financial assistance is offered to prevent families from losing their home in an emergency.

In CSA's senior services program, the elderly get a good meal — and an opportunity to socialize — through the daily hot lunches provided at the Senior Center on Escuela Avenue. Last year, more than 28,000 lunches were served. Case managers in the program work with seniors to find affordable housing and community resources that address their needs.

When it comes to homelessness, CSA takes a "housing first" approach through its Alpha Omega homeless services program.

"The housing-first model is to get them in a house; then everything else will build on it," explained associate director Maureen Wadiak.

In this program, case managers work with individuals to find housing and to connect them to other resources, including mental health counseling, transportation, legal advice and employment services.

CSA hopes to expand its homeless services program in the next few years in order to keep pace with Santa Clara County's 10-year plan to end chronic homelessness.

Myers said Mountain View residents have given generously to CSA over the years because they recognize the plight of their neighbors.

After all, as director of fund development Jim Boin said, "The face of poverty, the face of homelessness, the face of a lonely aged senior — there but for the grace of God go I." ■

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Veronico Quero of Mountain View picks up groceries at Community Services Agency on Tuesday.