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Homeless numbers on the rise in Mountain View



By Daniel DeBolt

The sound of breaking glass fills the air as Sarge and Carlos, two local homeless men, stand in line at the busy recycling center at San Antonio Shopping Center.

The two are about to cash in on their latest stockpile of bottles and cans for \$15. With about a dozen people waiting, the line is longer than it ever was before the recession, workers say.

"I've been out here in the wind for 38 years now," said Sarge, a Vietnam veteran who

wears a camouflage jacket with a U.S. flag patch. Carlos, 53, lives nearby in his truck, which is due to be towed away soon because it has sat there for two years. He has been on the streets for 10 years and suffers from occasional seizures, forcing him to rely on other homeless people like Sarge to make sure no one is in danger when they occur.

On Wednesday, Sarge entered rehab for alcohol abuse at the VA Hospital. If he gets clean, he will find it much easier to

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A homeless man who goes by the name of "Sarge" weighs in his bottles and cans for cash at a Mountain View recycling center on Tuesday. Sarge said he has been homeless for 38 years, and planned to go to the VA Hospital in Menlo Park later this week for rehabilitation.

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get into special housing for the homeless. It's a big incentive for him to complete rehab this time, he says. There is a chance, however, that the two local affordable housing projects that take in the homeless — San Antonio Place in Mountain View and the Opportunity Center in Palo Alto — will have no more space when he gets there.

A newly formed local group, the

North County Homeless Housing Coalition, hopes to fix that problem. Forty people showed up to the group's first public meeting last Monday. Their goal is to build housing or convert existing housing to be used by the chronically homeless in Mountain View.

"This is a very serious attempt at ending homelessness," said Duncan McVicar, a Community Services Agency board member who helped start the coalition.

Carlos and Sarge are among an estimated 300 homeless people in Mountain View who live in cars, motels, around vacant office

buildings, or sleep on friends' couches or in encampments along Steven's Creek. While an official count is not due until April, all signs point to a major increase in

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■ INFORMATION

For more information or to join the North County Homeless Housing Coalition, contact Julie Barton at (650) 961-8806, Gisela Daetz at (408) 738-4726, Duncan McVicar at (650) 962-8053 or Sue Shaffer (650) 967-0558.

local homelessness ever since the worldwide economic recession began last year. The county, which counts the homeless every two years, put the number of homeless in Mountain View at 122 in 2007.

McVicar says a new program to deal with homelessness called "Housing First" has been shown well-documented success in other cities. With Housing First, the chronically homeless — those who have been homeless for a number of years, rather than temporarily — are given affordable or free subsidized housing and assistance with getting employment or government aid to pay the rent.

The Opportunity Center in Palo Alto is an example of this kind of housing. When it opened in September 2006, one couple, homeless for five years, told the *Palo Alto Weekly* that "this is exactly what we needed to get back on our feet."

"Somebody who is only very briefly homeless usually finds some other way out of homelessness," McVicar said. "People who have been homeless for a while find their way into this program."

Rehab first

Much of the money for such projects comes from the government through grants and tax credits, McVicar said, though a portion will have to be raised from foundations and individual donors. Corporations that donate can receive substantial tax credits. "This is really a special form of an affordable housing project," McVicar said.

At the coalition meeting last week, many attendees were "enthused about the possibility of converting an apartment building," among other ideas, said Julie Barton, a founding member of the coalition.

McVicar says the new housing would likely be studio apartments for individuals, not families. The housing would not be appropriate for homeless people with mental problems or substance abuse problems, he said. For them, a rehabilitation program would be a prerequisite.

"There will always be a few people who would turn down an opportunity to be at this place" and instead continue drinking or doing drugs, McVicar said. "It's a big decision."

The coalition's founding four members, McVicar, Barton, Sue Schaffer and Giseal Daetz, are all from Los Altos. McVicar and Daetz are board members on the CSA. Barton and Schaffer worked with the rotating, church-based Alpha Omega Homeless Shelter program before it closed in 2006.

By the numbers

The number of homeless people who receive special services at the CSA, such as housing assistance and financial aid, has nearly doubled since the recession began last year, said Tom Myers, CSA's director.

While not an indicator of population, "it definitely indicates there are more homeless in the community," Myers said.

The CSA's special homeless services program assists the homeless "with getting benefits, applying for food stamps, general assistance, social security, medical benefits, financial assistance, dental, vision, food, clothing, employment assistance and finding shelters," said Nadia Ilieva, the CSA's homeless services specialist.

In the last half of 2008, more than 300 people used CSA's homeless services, compared to about 175 in the first half of the year. But those numbers don't include the family members of each person the CSA counts, McVicar said — for example, a mother coming in on behalf of her family only counts as a single homeless person, even though her whole family might be homeless.

On the other hand, not all of the people the CSA sees are without a roof over their heads. Many stay with friends or in motels.

"About one half of all homeless people CSA sees are housed," McVicar said.

At the CSA, the number of people who show up each day for a free grocery program, open to anyone, has increased from about 200 a day to about 300, with a line stretching around the parking lot, said Ladrea Clark, CSA's nutrition and health education assistant. ■