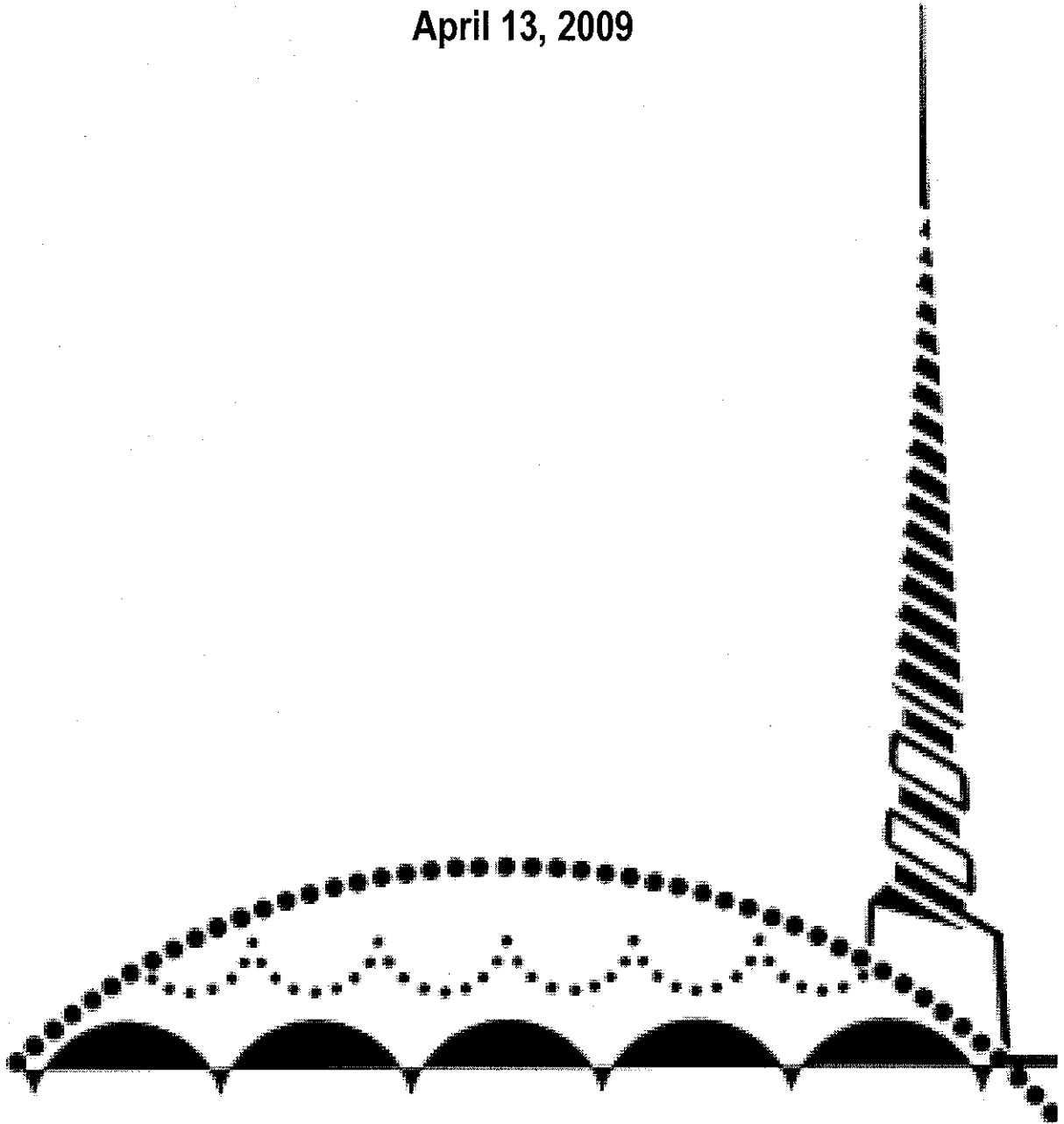
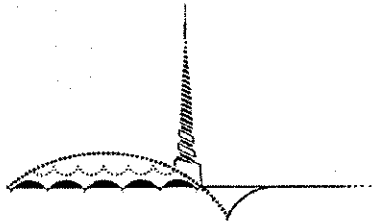


2008-2009 MARIN COUNTY CIVIL GRAND JURY

Marin's homeless: The 'invisible' problem that won't disappear

April 13, 2009





SUMMARY

Marin's homeless predicament, as elsewhere in California and the nation, involves staggering complexity and nuance. Its remedy, however, remains simple: Because the numbers increase one person at a time, they can be reduced one person at a time.

To believe we can erase the problem would be naïve, yet to think we can shrink it to a tolerable level is not.

This quality-of-life issue is hardly new. But attempts in the 1990s to assuage the plight of Marin's homeless faded away. More recently, the county's Ten-Year Homeless Plan, compiled in 2006, has not been substantially implemented.

What are today's major hurdles? First, getting our governmental boards and agencies to find the political will to help an "invisible" population that many county residents don't even realize exists. Second, spurring county and city officials, along with the pertinent nonprofits, to determine *jointly* how to lead the homeless off the streets, out of their vehicles and away from Marin's open spaces.

Assistance must come in various ways because the homeless fall into numerous categories. Some need to address their drug or alcohol addictions. Others require mental health assistance. Many seek medical attention. Most lack jobs.

But they *all* need a place to sleep at night.

Although Marin targets millions of dollars for the homeless, and many organizations and cities address separate pieces of the puzzle, no one has a handle on the crisis as a whole.

No one knows for sure how many homeless people live in Marin. Official estimates range from 1,770 to 6,000, but school officials put the number of homeless youth alone at more than 1,500.

The Grand Jury believes that the Marin County Board of Supervisors can ameliorate the situation. We recommend that the supervisors establish a full-time coordinator and office to oversee public and private efforts to deal with the problem, and establish a permanent emergency shelter open to all. We also recommend that the board and leaders of Marin's 11 municipalities work cooperatively to heighten public awareness so the "invisible" problem can become visible.

Despite some controversy, county officials and consultants have already made inroads. They've obtained federal funds and sponsored one-day, one-stop events to aid the needy.

Many nonprofits and a few cities are doing their best to provide a wide range of services to the homeless.

But it's not enough—not even close.

Men and women who are homeless come from assorted ethnic and religious backgrounds, from multiple corners of society. Though stereotypical images of the chronic homeless suggest ragged people from the lowest socio-economic strata, today's growing rolls include the recently middle class, yanked into homelessness by one unexpected financial crisis or illness.

Unlike the waifs of poverty found in literature and TV dramas, the homeless can look just like an average taxpayer—like an unemployed cousin, a confused mother or father, a fragile grandparent.

Homeless ranks in Marin still consist mainly of adult white males, but the number of women and families slipping through the cracks and needing a “safety net” increases daily.

Many are intelligent, well schooled and articulate. Many are compassionate and will share food, and perhaps their last dollars, with fellow homeless. Yet many, as one told the Grand Jury, feel desperate, “disconnected from community, family, the past and from expectations.”

Clearly, not all homeless will accept either a hand-up or a handout. Some prefer an unfettered outdoor lifestyle and will ask for relief only when facing an emergency. Although many are transient, a lot more stay in specific communities and are afraid to veer far from routines where they scrounge food and services.

It's because we often can't see them for what they are—ordinary humans pushed into extraordinary straits, narrowly focused on day-to-day survival—that they stay “invisible,” sometimes living in cheerless, darkened places we choose not to peer into or even wander by.

That, of course, contrasts dramatically with the way we prefer to picture Marin—as a place of prosperity and natural beauty. And that's why the Grand Jury deems it imperative to shine a light on the county's homeless.

BACKGROUND

Homeless services in Marin evolved from interfaith connections in 1974, when 40 church delegates came together in downtown San Rafael to address the homeless situation. Today the faith-based community occasionally acts through an advocacy group called the Marin Organizing Committee, which helped flex the political muscle of churches, synagogues and nonprofits in December 2008. The fledgling organization pulled together

a rally-march that drew 250 participants and prompted the county to open temporary emergency shelters.

Some progress dates back to the early 1990s. The Marin County Blue Ribbon Homeless Working Group identified gaps in service and housing, and official action followed street protests and the erection of a tent city downhill from the Civic Center.

A 1994 Grand Jury report on "Homelessness in Marin County" cited the need for a county coordinator and housing, two gaps that persist in 2009. In response to that report, the Board of Supervisors put the Marin Housing Authority in charge of an "effort to develop a comprehensive approach to the problem of homelessness in Marin." Over the years, though, that "comprehensive" effort fizzled. And no coordinator was hired.

Nonprofit, community-based organizations were left to bear the lion's share of the burden, a load that's become heavier as funding has tightened.

Many people interviewed by the 2008-2009 Grand Jury call for the county, municipalities and nonprofits to participate more robustly, alone and together. They agree, too, that the political will of officials, especially at the county level, requires a strong nudge.

The Grand Jury has issued no specific reports on homelessness since 1994. This report, therefore, seems overdue.

METHODOLOGY

The Grand Jury conducted more than 35 interviews with county and city officials, nonprofit service providers, federal grant recipients, consultants, planners and policy specialists, clergy, police and homeless individuals. Most who were questioned were both passionate and compassionate. The bulk of the interviews took place in Marin, but some occurred in nearby counties to help compare "best practices" for governmental agencies and programs—that is, those techniques most efficient and effective in meeting goals.

The Grand Jury digested reports and graphs, analyses and grant proposals from public and private groups. It reviewed scores of articles from the Marin Independent Journal, San Francisco Chronicle and other periodicals, and checked out countless Internet sites. In addition, it surveyed the 11 incorporated municipalities within Marin's boundaries.

Members of the Grand Jury also conducted on-site visits to numerous facilities; witnessed a homeless support group; attended a pro-shelter rally-march; and went to two events that presented a cornucopia of services for the needy.

DISCUSSION

Who are the homeless?

Bob Herbert, columnist for The New York Times, quotes a North Carolina woman who mirrors the thoughts of many homeless: "I never believed that anything like this could ever, ever happen to me."

And San Francisco Chronicle writer C.W. Nevius spotlights a member of that city's Homeless Outreach Team who relives her time on the streets: "I was homeless for two years. I slept in the cemetery and got my food by stealing from Safeway."

Their stories match those of hundreds of thousands thrust into unfamiliar strife as they watched the fabric of The American Dream unravel in 2008 and tatter still more in 2009.

No one knows exactly how many homeless live in Marin, though it's generally agreed the bulk are in San Rafael, Novato, Sausalito and unincorporated areas. Most interviewees assert, however, that *any* figures obtained about the homeless are most likely severe underestimates.

One report claims a total of 6,000. Others use the national rule of thumb, which is 1 percent of the population; in Marin, that is 2,500. The latest biennial point-in-time count, taken by about 100 volunteers in 50 agencies or programs on January 29, 2009, lists 1,770.

The "one-day snapshot" also finds 3,028 "precariously housed"—defined as "on the edge of becoming homeless or at imminent risk of falling into the unsheltered category; people [who] may be doubled up with friends and relatives or living in excessively overcrowded accommodation."

Officials told the Grand Jury that there are probably another 15,000 Marin residents who are one financial crisis away from being homeless.

And, according to the Marin County Office of Education, Marin has 1,519 homeless youth—including 1,093 enrolled in and attending classes. Of those in school, 996 are "doubled up," staying with another family, while 87 more are in shelters or transitional housing awaiting foster care.

Those figures represent only students who have been identified; "unfortunately," one official says, "there are no doubt many more."

A March 2009 report from the National Center on Family Homelessness says homeless children suffer "lasting scars" and are apt to be hungry, afflicted with persistent health problems, repeat school grades and become high school dropouts.

The economic downturn, which one interviewee said “has caused a sea change in the last six to eight months,” is affecting the most vulnerable adults—many are losing the overtime necessary to buy essentials, or losing a second or third job.

The economy, that official added, is also causing “a tsunami of uninsured.” People who lose their health insurance often delay going to doctors. If they become sicker, they might need expensive tests or treatments. Paying those bills can be such a burden that people are forced out of their homes, thus helping to trigger homelessness.

Shocking as it may appear, statistics released by the Marin County Department of Health and Human Services (H&HS) in March 2009 show that “even before the current downturn, 35,387 out of 100,201 households in Marin could not pay for the most basic services.” The department says the income required for a family of three to attain a self-sufficiency level here is \$5,740 a month or \$68,880 annually.

A February 2009 H&HS report states unequivocally, “There is clear evidence of a significant upward trend in the number of homeless and precariously housed in Marin County.”

H&HS saw a 30 to 40 percent spike in the demand for homeless services since September 2008. Foreclosed homes and a shrinking job market raised the number of those becoming homeless for the first time.

The Bay Area-wide 211 hotline that directs callers to services had more than 1,500 inquiries from Marin residents in the year following February 11, 2008, its startup date—375 of them dealing with shelter and housing.

County and city officials, as well as service providers, agree that because 85 percent of Marin is dedicated open space, many sleep under the stars in small encampments, in blankets or tents, no matter how foul the weather. Or they huddle in cars.

The homeless often feel—as one told the Grand Jury—lonely and isolated, traumatized, bored, looked down upon, mocked. They don't trust anyone except their close friends.

Another interviewee referenced Barack Obama's campaign remark that some people can't pull themselves up by their bootstraps because they “don't have any boots.” And one homeless woman recalled it being particularly hard “to apply for a job when you've slept outside and are pulling a suitcase behind you.”

Places to sleep, outside or in, with access to food and other services, are becoming increasingly scarce in Marin. Unlike the “invisible” homeless who won't disappear, potential sites are vanishing. That's due to some areas being refurbished, and because freeway work has eliminated previously usable spots.

And because the turmoil has been allowed to fester, the county is beginning to see a second-generation crisis—that is, adult children of the chronic homeless who are now living without shelter themselves.

One nonprofit spokesperson insists, “Nine out of 10 homeless people want help and housing. It is a myth that they want to remain homeless.”

Most of Marin's homeless live at a subsistence level, despite getting general assistance and food stamps. A 2008 report from The Abaris Group, healthcare consultants commissioned by the county, maintains that, despite all the organizations geared up to help, “available emergency and transitional housing for the homeless falls far short of demand, and many essential services for this population are lacking, particularly in terms of medical/healthcare needs.”

One source told the Grand Jury about a homeless man who had been injured climbing in and out of dumpsters seeking food, and about a homeless woman “with diminished capacity” who couldn't get necessary treatment because she couldn't hold onto her medical card.

More than a few interviewees advocate that county officials shift some funds so Marin can pay a homeless coordinator's salary and rent low-income housing units.

Would those specific actions end homelessness? No. But they could result in an improved partnership between public and private sectors, enabling the providers to use scarce resources in the most efficient and effective ways. And that could go a long way toward solving the problem.

Where's the coordination and accountability?

In interviews with the Grand Jury, representatives of the Board of Supervisors and the Department of Health & Human Services, consultants, city officials, nonprofit providers and homeless individuals reiterate that:

- A best-case scenario would have the county create an Office of the Homeless that would be accountable for overseeing Marin's homeless problem, for knowing the full complement of services available, and for collecting relevant data. An administrator-manager in that office would monitor pass-through funds (those streaming into county coffers from federal and state funds) and create a blueprint of exactly how Marin could reduce homelessness. Since H&HS already has three employees devoting half time to the problem of homelessness, and because the office could assume work being done under a \$100,000 contract with a private firm, the cost of establishing such an office might be negligible. The notion of hiring a coordinator parallels the first “action item” in the county's Ten-Year Homeless Plan, although no one has been assigned that responsibility in the three years since it was published. The plan is a document prepared to qualify for federal funding, and it extensively outlines steps to alleviate homelessness.

- Sadly, homelessness did not even make the supervisors' list of top five 2008-09 priorities. One that did was a "national bicycle-pedestrian/non-motorized model for Marin." Due to an apparent lack of political will, funding for homeless needs remains limited mostly to pass-through dollars..

One nonprofit spokesperson says the Board of Supervisors doesn't "want to hear the dark side; they only want to hear the success stories." Other interviewees charge officials in effect would prefer the homeless stay "invisible," as would the bulk of Marin's upscale residents.

But Philip F. Mangano, the nation's homelessness czar, believes accountability and political will are imperative. "There needs to be someone, at the local level, who can take ownership" of homelessness policies, he says.

One Marin official at a nonprofit organization puts it this way: "There needs to be a front door where the homeless person comes, is assessed and then directed to services. There needs to be a strategy to deal with the chronically homeless. The county could play an active role in aligning organizations. Right now, the services are too scattered."

Instead of taking on the responsibility for maintaining that front door, for creating an office to coordinate homeless services, the Marin County Board of Supervisors turned to HomeBase, a public interest law firm located in San Francisco that specializes in matters relating to homelessness.

The board signed a \$100,000-a-year contract with the firm last year. For that money, HomeBase has written a grant proposal that helped Marin retain \$2.3 million in homeless grants from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. Those funds went to nonprofits that provide transitional or affordable housing to those in need, to others that help the homeless with mental or substance abuse issues, and to help women who need housing after fleeing from domestic violence.

In the process, HomeBase created a leadership council, a Homeless Policy Steering Committee and work groups to facilitate conversations between the numerous splintered agencies and nonprofits dealing with the homeless in Marin County. The county's chief administrator, two members of the Board of Supervisors, a policy strategist and two analysts, two homeless individuals and representatives of many nonprofit providers sit on those bodies and try to hammer out some solutions.

The law firm's work also led to creation of five beds geared for newly discharged patients who otherwise might slip into homelessness. And it gets credit for starting Project Homeless Connect, a highly praised series of one-stop, one-day events in San Rafael, Novato and Sausalito showcasing a wide variety of services to the homeless.

But HomeBase's contract has sparked controversy. Though supporters say the firm has effectively cobbled together a coalition likely to thrive, most of those interviewed by the Grand Jury think that it's being paid too much and that it would be better to create a

homelessness office or hire a single coordinator instead, preferably one based in the county's Department of Health and Human Services.

Why is housing crucial?

Most involved in working to help the homeless believe housing should be *the* critical item in any discussion of how to attack the problem, even before services.

Key county officials endorse the concept of "housing first." Their consensus is that rescuing people subjected to the elements by supplying permanent affordable housing could save huge amounts of money.

Providers concur. Those interviewed by the Grand Jury have no doubt the cost of taking care of homeless in shelters or on the streets is the same as, or more than, housing them.

But finding affordable housing is a daunting problem in Marin County, where the prevailing view is to retain open space and limit growth.

The Marin Housing Authority, governed by the county's five supervisors and two public members, is charged with providing "decent, safe and sanitary housing for low- and moderate-income people." It is rendered largely powerless, however, by a lack of adequate funding and the dearth of low-income housing in the county.

The authority has one program directly impacting the homeless. Its Support for Shelter Plus Care program provides rental subsidies and case management for up to 114 homeless and mentally ill adults.

At least two nonprofit officials are convinced, though, that sufficient affordable housing already exists in Marin to make a severe dent in the homelessness problem. They say it isn't necessary to build big projects when homes are available, scattered throughout the county, to house small numbers.

Those officials point out that, under state law, up to six homeless people could be placed in each of those rentable structures without bureaucratic red tape getting in the way.

Many interviewees are convinced there are only two enduring solutions: affordable housing and "supportive housing," which incorporates on-site medical and mental health care.

Without appropriate housing, one nonprofit leader says, "we're wasting money every day. We spend money when the homeless get arrested, go to the hospital or need emergency shelter. Ten percent of the homeless require 50 percent of the funds. We need 'housing first' for these people. Give them a room, with a bathroom down the hall, and make it permanent. When that is done, this population can be stabilized and we can see results."

Where does the money go?

Because of the lack of housing funding available to any agency, the Department of Health & Human Services, the arm of county government that deals most with homelessness, must help with more and more basic services.

A March 2009 H&HS report contains estimated annual expenditures related to homeless services. It lists dollars targeted for that population as \$13,639,639. Most of that money is state and federal funding the county passes on to nonprofits, including these larger amounts: \$3,738,539 to Buckelew Programs for housing and support services for the mentally ill; \$791,044 to multiple providers for substance abuse treatment; \$634,525 to the Odyssey Program (formerly known as HAVEN), under the county's Community Mental Health Services; \$517,769 to Homeward Bound for emergency beds; \$504,477 to the Housing Authority for its Shelter Plus Care program; and \$479,089 for general assistance.

In addition, the following sums were earmarked from county coffers (and, therefore, from local taxpayer pockets): \$500,000 to Homeward Bound for transitional housing services; \$100,000 for the HomeBase contract; \$96,000 for this winter's emergency shelter; and part of the salaries of an H&HS policy strategist and two policy analysts.

As part of the 2009 federal stimulus package, Marin expects to receive \$659,106 in September "for homeless prevention and rapid re-housing." County officials plan to use at least part of that money to forestall evictions.

What are others doing?

The Marin County Board of Supervisors does not stand alone in its failure to deal adequately with the homeless situation. Most local political leaders have, for the most part, turned a blind eye to the predicament, saying, in essence, it's not their problem.

The biggest exception is San Rafael, a magnet for homeless because the most services exist within its borders. The city goes a giant step farther than the rest, funding two specially trained police officers and a pair of mental health workers to deal with the problem.

Although most municipal and county officials plead that they're doing the best they can, especially given the downward economic spiral, several interviewees unfavorably compare our county's governance and support with that of Sonoma County, San Francisco and Portland, Oregon.

Consider, for instance, individual programs such as the Petaluma-based Committee on the Shelterless (COTS), which utilizes 50,000 volunteer hours annually and shelters more than 1,000 homeless each year. The Sonoma County nonprofit operates three emergency shelters, three transitional housing facilities and two food-delivery programs. Its greatest

source of income is its home city, which provides more than \$800,000 yearly, showing that a municipality *can* lend financial support. And Sonoma County, which also partners with Burbank Housing, a nonprofit affordable-housing development, contributes more than \$200,000 to the COTS budget.

Another community offering a good comparison is Portland, Oregon, where a comprehensive strategy to confront homelessness and create a single "front door" for the needy was partnered by the county, city, nonprofits and businesses. Prior to that cooperative effort, it could take four agencies to deal with one person.

San Francisco, of course, has one of the most visible homeless populations in Northern California. Like Marin, it contracts with HomeBase to obtain federal funds; the partnership has entered its fifth year. But San Francisco does more—such as having a homeless policy director who coordinates a governmental attack on the problem working in conjunction with nonprofits, foundations and other private organizations.

Because San Francisco is a county *and* a city, making things happen there tends to be easier. Another thrust comes from the political will to get results for its 6,514 homeless, according to one official.

A penchant for "housing first"—which entails moving people off the streets into permanent affordable units and then treating the causes of their homelessness—drives the policy director's efforts. That concept reverses the norm of providing services first. Housing those vulnerable men and women and thereby limiting the harm they can do to themselves or others results in a significant drop in the need for acute or emergency care, officials say.

San Francisco also staffs a 38-member Homeless Outreach Team that goes to the homeless rather than waiting for the needy to come to them. And, according to a June 2008 San Francisco Civil Grand Jury report, the city budgets "about \$186 million for direct spending on the homeless or those at risk."

Where do our municipalities stand?

The Grand Jury mailed a questionnaire to all 11 incorporated towns and cities in Marin. San Rafael, experts agree, has the largest number of homeless. Novato is second. Third would be Sausalito, where the homeless consist mainly of "anchor-outs," those whose boats have no running water or electricity. Smaller municipalities claim between zero and 10 homeless each.

San Rafael provides services for the homeless that include funding two police officers who work closely with mental health personnel; giving \$40,000 annually to the Ritter Center for housing support programs; and providing financial assistance to such facilities as the St. Vincent de Paul Society and Homeward Bound.

Novato, which gave Homeward Bound two long-term, \$1-per-year ground leases for its transitional housing buildings, also funds the Novato Human Needs Center's homeless prevention program (\$105,000 each year since 1995).

Sausalito, which gets many homeless who cross the Golden Gate Bridge and pass through after a couple of days, set up a \$2,000 fund in 2007 for emergency shelter (a one-night motel stay), groceries and bus fare out. Police administer it.

Most city law enforcement agents agree that homeless encampments pose hazards (fire, public health and personal safety) for those living in them and for neighbors. Municipalities tend to clear them out, but one city official sums up the prevalent attitude this way: "Our goal is not one of arrest/enforcement, but rather to aid individuals in relocating to a better, safer location where additional services can be provided."

Many officials support the idea of a coordinated effort led by someone paid by the county; some would like to see a multi-jurisdictional team created, similar to the Major Crimes Task Force.

Even though smaller towns and cities have but a few homeless within their boundaries, most of their officials believe that "homelessness is a countywide problem as many homeless people move from community to community with limited resources available." They say it is crucial for county and local governments to join in an effort to end homelessness.

About half the municipal representatives, however, voice budgetary caveats, particularly stemming from the economic downturn.

Where do shelters fit in?

Money is an obstacle, too, when it comes to providing emergency shelter.

Hundreds here need a place to safeguard them from wet or cold weather. Available beds are more and more difficult to find, with most shelters in Marin being offered only to those not using drugs or alcohol.

A permanent open or "wet shelter," one to which homeless alcohol and drug users have access at least in the winter, could become a portal to services. This year, the county did open such a warming shelter after two homeless people were treated for exposure. But that shelter ran only temporarily—first in December at the Marin Center Exhibition Hall, and later in the National Guard Armory in San Rafael, where the Helen Vine Detox Center operated it under a county contract through mid-February. Between 40 and 80 homeless stayed each night, but many more declined because they wouldn't agree to be searched, were intimidated by the military setting or because photo IDs were required.

Since county funding was limited, homeless were temporarily housed between times at the Vineyard and Lucas Valley Community churches. Homeward Bound helped prepare

and serve meals, provided janitorial services and made sure clean blankets and mats were available. Medical services and security were supplied as well.

Later, from mid-February until the end of March, a dozen churches and synagogues alternately housed and fed about 60 people nightly. The faith-based organizations struggled, however, to come up with all the \$40,000 needed to pay for that effort. In late March, the Marin Community Foundation contributed the last \$10,000. The Rev. Liza Klein of San Rafael First United Methodist Church told the Marin Independent Journal the county should have helped financially: "Something less than 5 percent of the population in Marin goes to church or synagogue. We're being asked to take responsibility for something that 100 percent of the people should be taking responsibility for."

Suzanne Walker, associate director of St. Vincent's, which feeds many homeless in San Rafael, backs the idea of a permanent wet shelter. In a letter to the Independent Journal, she wrote, "While it's true that we've come a long way from the days of tent city, there are plenty of folks out there tonight who could be camped in front of the Civic Center...It is getting worse in these tough economic times. It's time for a county-funded shelter to be made a budget priority in Marin."

Why isn't the Ten-Year Plan working?

In 2006, the county's Ten-Year Plan was compiled, its main purpose being to meet federal Department of Housing and Urban Development grant application requirements. A major by-product was to outline a long-range, comprehensive series of steps that could end homelessness in Marin. It hasn't worked.

Why? Because, according to some providers, the county hasn't expended the energy to update it and promote its main proposals. Among the recommendations that jump out as having been ignored or, at best, subject to foot-dragging for three years:

- Coordinate and distribute information on homeless services and resources.
- Provide emergency services, on demand, 24/7.
- Create a countywide standard of case management.
- Update a system of tracking data and services.
- Prevent evictions by providing financial aid for at-risk people.

Unfortunately, most aims of the plan simply became paper phantasms, as county officials disavowed most of its elements as unworkable.

However, many who work with the homeless continue to believe much of the plan is still valid. Foremost, they say, is its call for a coordinator to ride herd on the disparate

programs that already exist. Another element they encourage is an updated and workable database of homeless services and facilities.

They also point to the plan's declaration that "helping someone stay in their home is far more economical and humane than providing services to someone after they become homeless."

They note, too, that it urges "on-demand access to mental health [and] substance use services including detoxification and domestic violence services and shelter"—in short, "no waiting time to enter treatment programs."

Who is helping?

A host of nonprofits have stepped up to do the necessary case-management and in-the-streets work. Topping the list, officials say, are Homeward Bound, St. Vincent's, the Ritter Center, Buckelew Programs and Helen Vine Detox (also known as The Vine). But there are many others in a county hosting more than 1,700 nonprofits.

Officials and providers also cite the good works of the Canal Alliance, the result of a 2005 merger of two smaller groups that has sought to improve the educational and economic well being of the Spanish-speaking neighborhood of San Rafael; Center Point, which provides substance abuse treatment services and helps achieve family stability and permanency; Marin Abused Women's Services (MAWS), which offers emergency and transitional shelters; and EAH Housing, which was established in 1968 as the Ecumenical Association for Housing and focuses on affordable housing.

Because of the economic downturn, however, all agencies are experiencing funding cutbacks.

The Marin Community Foundation has been of enormous benefit to the homeless through the years. But it revamped its philosophy in 2006, opting to curtail funding for operating expenses of nonprofits. Those cuts were partially responsible for the closing of Nine Grove Lane, a unique San Anselmo facility that throughout the year had housed 80-100 homeless, abused, in-crisis or runaway youths. Marin Family Action, which helps low-income residents, also was scheduled to shut down, but a belated grant from the foundation temporarily rescued it.

The sliding economy made the foundation shift its position again, at least temporarily, and it spread \$250,000 among 11 agencies—including seven emergency pantries supplied by the Marin Community Food Bank. Those grants came as demands for food doubled. And in December 2008, the foundation awarded another \$750,000 to providers who work with the homeless.

Nonprofits helping the most people, according to several officials, include:

- **Homeward Bound**, which in April 2000 replaced the winter shelter with its New Beginnings Center. The change was stimulated by part of the decommissioned Hamilton Air Force Base in Novato being pinpointed, under terms of the federal McKinney Act, for homeless housing and services. The nonprofit, whose services are offered only to the clean and sober, is based in Novato but has 13 components throughout the county. All told, it fills 400 beds. Its newest building, the Next Key Center, combines job training (including a culinary arts program called Fresh Starts Catering) and 32 units of transitional housing. The usual entry point for adult services is the Mill Street Center, a 40-bed emergency shelter for night-to-night stays. Then comes New Beginnings, where people can stay in dormitory-style housing up to six months; the Fourth Street Center, with 20 single-room occupancy units; the Fireside Apartments, which houses eight seniors; and Next Key. Families go to six locations: the Family Emergency Center, with 14 rooms available on an emergency basis; the Family Resource Center, offering transitional housing for nine families; Meadow Park, with housing for another four; Family Park, benefiting eight more; San Clemente Family Homes, with permanent affordable housing for four families; and Fireside again, with 10 family units. Homeward Bound also runs Voyager/Carmel and Palm Court, which house the mentally ill.
- **St. Vincent's** serves between 250 and 350 homeless a day in its San Rafael dining room, and helps out with rental deposits, utility assistance and referrals. Many who get help here live below the poverty line. More than 2 million meals have been served since it opened in 1981. It also provides eight affordable housing units. Its yearly budget is approximately \$1 million.
- **Ritter Center**, with a \$1.2 million annual budget, serves homeless of all types—including families, the working poor, the mentally ill and the disabled. It provides day services (showers, laundry facilities, food, clothing, and mail boxes for 400). Its health center assists more than 3,000 people annually.
- **Buckelew**, established in 1970, provides the most comprehensive services for those with mental health issues, some of whom are homeless. It serves almost 1,000 residents in Marin, Sonoma and Napa via 20 programs, and has an annual budget of more than \$9.7 million (\$5.2 million in Marin). Its main aim is to provide affordable housing, jobs and recovery support services. It supplies support services to clients in 249 housing units it owns or manages—and to many who live elsewhere in the three counties.
- **The Vine**, an 18-bed facility that helps adults under the influence of drugs and/or alcohol withdraw from them, has aided more than 9,000 in its nine years of existence, almost half of them homeless. Detoxification stays are normally three to five days but can run as long as 30. Therapy sessions are frequent. Also available are a doctor, nurse and psychologists as well as spiritual and 12-step program assistance.
- **MarinLink** runs Project Homeless Connect, Marin's budding copy of a San Francisco model that has spread to 170 cities. At two "under-one-roof" events attended by Grand

Jury members, free food was available, as were free transportation and HIV testing. In addition, homeless persons could receive health, dental, vision and foot care; mental health support and legal aid; have their hair cut; and could speak with representatives from agencies that deal with housing and shelter, veterans benefits, motor vehicles, camping out, employment, substance abuse and Social Security. Officials and nonprofits have universally commended the four one-day events held so far.

- **Community Action Marin (CAM)** in 1967, a year after it was incorporated, was designated the county's official anti-poverty agency; it still retains that label. Through the years it has served more than 2.5 million meals to low-income children, and has aided 150,000 residents of the county. CAM used seed money to set up forerunners of Homeward Bound, Ritter House and The Vine, and then spun them off as independent agencies. With a budget approaching \$19 million, it now provides 15 programs, many of which touch on homeless needs.

- **The Marin Organizing Committee**, the main advocate for a county-supported emergency shelter, is a comparatively new group formed specifically to push homeless issues. It is heavily populated with representatives of faith-based organizations but also draws support from providers as well as county and municipal governments.

Will we stop the dying?

In the past 11 years, 139 homeless people died on Marin streets.

With the economy being what it is, more and more people are slipping into poverty or at-risk situations. The signs are all around us.

The day before Christmas 2008, a San Francisco Chronicle story said 288,000 Californians applied for food stamps "over the past year, bringing the total number enrolled close to 2.4 million."

The same day, another Chronicle dispatch noted that "some Bay Area cities are dealing with an increase in shoplifting, a trend police and security experts believe is linked to tough economic times prompting people to steal items out of need as well as greed." Items included diapers and baby clothes as well as diabetic test strips.

A January 2009 Department of Health and Human Services report indicates 10-12 percent of detainees in the Marin County jail are homeless.

Unemployment figures for that month, meanwhile, show Marin County's jobless rate had risen to 6.6 percent, obviously putting even more people at risk.

According to Bay Area Rescue Mission, a Richmond-based agency that helps the homeless, there are 165,000 homeless in the nine-county San Francisco Bay Area.

All these figures represent a lot of pain.

It is clear that because federal, state and foundation funding is drying up, helping the homeless has become more problematic for every county, particularly in regard to mental health services. In the last two years alone, California eliminated almost \$3 million Marin received for mentally ill homeless and offenders.

Dwindling funds, many interviewees say, may be another impetus to creating a central homeless office that would act as a clearinghouse for information and services. Coordinating what limited services remain and helping eliminate any duplication could become especially meaningful actions.

The cutbacks also could make municipal government officials more receptive to joining forces with each other as well as county and nonprofit leaders.

The economy, moreover, might spur a closer look at "housing first" possibilities, particularly if they can be shown to be more cost-effective than other potential homeless solutions. One high-ranking Marin County aide, in fact, suggested the need for "a housing czar."

Another county official labeled the homelessness problem "our biggest hidden secret. We need to raise the consciousness of Marin—many don't know there are homeless people in our county."

Recent publicity about the point-in-time count and the need for a permanent emergency shelter may help a bit. But more public awareness is crucial, nonprofit officials insist. They urge a push toward that end by both county and municipalities.

Officials, providers and homeless men and women told the Grand Jury that the homeless cannot be treated as statistics but must be seen as individuals with faces and flesh. They must be helped out of homelessness one person at a time, several interviewees said.

The two main advocates for the homeless on the Board of Supervisors are Susan Adams and Steve Kinsey. Adams, in fact, may have summed up the situation when she told the Pacific Sun in December 2008:

"People are dying because they don't have a place to live. And that's a crying shame in a county as wealthy as Marin."

Surely, most interviewees agree, a county that operated with a 2008-09 budget of \$430 million, has enough wiggle room even in an economic downturn to hire a coordinator and then improve care for its most vulnerable citizens.

As one provider told the Grand Jury, "If we don't pay for this now, we will pay for it later in services such as emergency rooms, jails and other institutions."

FINDINGS

The Grand Jury finds that:

F1. The Marin County Board of Supervisors, the Marin County Department of Health and Human Services and a number of boards facilitated by HomeBase has each exerted leadership regarding the homeless, yet none accepts overall responsibility.

F2. There is a need for a county office and coordinator responsible for overseeing agencies and programs aiding the homeless.

F3. The Board of Supervisors' list of top five priorities does not include homelessness.

F4. Estimates of the number of homeless in Marin vary widely, from a low of 1,770 to as many as 6,000. School officials estimate there are more than 1,500 homeless youth.

F5. Hundreds of homeless need emergency shelter. They sleep in Marin's open space or their cars, having been turned away by nonprofits because of bed shortages or drug and alcohol restrictions.

F6. Many Marin residents are unaware of or uneducated about the hundreds of homeless in the county.

F7. The cities of San Rafael, Novato and Sausalito, along with the unincorporated areas of Marin, comprise the pockets most peppered with homeless.

F8. Project Homeless Connect marks a noteworthy start toward offering homeless a one-day, one-stop entry point for services.

F9. County officials, working in tandem with HomeBase, obtained \$2.3 million in federal Housing and Urban Development funds, underwrote Project Homeless Connect and provided medical respite beds.

F10. Many nonprofits—including but not limited to Homeward Bound, Ritter Center, St. Vincent's, Buckelew and Helen Vine Detox—supply valuable and wide-ranging services to homeless individuals.

F11. Controversy surrounds Marin's \$100,000 annual contract with HomeBase. While its supporters claim the firm has been building a coalition, many nonprofit officials reject that idea and charge it also is being paid too much. HomeBase's work could be done more effectively in a county homelessness office.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Grand Jury recommends that:

R1. The Marin County Board of Supervisors establish a full-time coordinator and office dedicated to overseeing the agencies, organizations and programs that collectively provide care and services for the homeless.

R2. The Board of Supervisors establish a facility for a permanent homeless shelter—at least for winter months—where non-disruptive drug and alcohol users are welcomed.

R3. The Board of Supervisors make homelessness one of its top five priorities.

R4. The Board of Supervisors and leaders of each Marin County municipality jointly launch a comprehensive campaign to heighten public awareness of homelessness and make the “invisible” problem visible.

REQUEST FOR RESPONSES

Pursuant to Penal Code Section 933.05, the Grand Jury requests responses from the following governing bodies:

- The Marin County Board of Supervisors: **All Findings and Recommendations.**
- The city and town councils of Marin's 11 incorporated municipalities (Belvedere, Corte Madera, Fairfax, Larkspur, Mill Valley, Novato, Ross, San Anselmo, San Rafael, Sausalito and Tiburon): **F5, F6 and F7 and R4.**

The governing bodies indicated above should be aware that the comment or response of the governing body must be conducted in accordance with Penal Code Section 933 (c) and subject to the notice, agenda and open meeting requirements of the Ralph M. Brown Act.

California Penal Code Section 933 (c) states that “...the governing body of the public agency shall comment to the presiding judge on the findings and recommendations pertaining to matters under the control of the governing body.” Further, the Ralph M. Brown Act requires that any action of a public entity governing board occur only at a noticed and agendized public meeting.

The Grand Jury also invites responses from officials of:

- Homeward Bound, Buckelew Programs, the St. Vincent de Paul Society, the Ritter Center, the Helen Vine Detox Center, MarinLink, Community Action Marin, the Marin Organizing Committee and the Marin Community Foundation.

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Reports issued by the Civil Grand Jury do not identify individuals interviewed. Penal Code Section 929 requires that reports of the Grand Jury not contain the name of any person, or facts leading to the identity of any person who provides information to the Civil Grand Jury. The California State Legislature has stated that it intends the provisions of Penal Code Section 929 prohibiting disclosure of witness identities to encourage full candor in testimony in Civil Grand Jury investigations by protecting the privacy and confidentiality of those who participate in any Civil Grand Jury investigation.