Blog

November 2, 2020

Well, this is awkward… about those encampments

Housing Matters is the largest nonprofit in Santa Cruz County working exclusively on the issue of homelessness. We connect unhoused community members with housing. While we offer things like public showers and a mailroom, our ultimate goal is to end homelessness for everyone in Santa Cruz County living without a home. And we do that, one person or family at a time. Because, as you likely know, housing solves homelessness.

There has been a lot of discussion about encampments in Santa Cruz. People have asked if we think it's a "bad look." Community members have griped about yet another major encampment popping up just before winter. We've even been called out about it on social media.

The bottom line is, encampments are a brutally honest portrayal of homelessness in Santa Cruz County. And it's something we can all learn from.

We're doing a lot

180 Together is just ONE initiative among many, and that effort alone has now housed over 1000 people in the last eight years. 1000 people who were, in fact, previously chronically homeless. That means that they were homeless multiple times or for at least a year, and suffer from a disabling condition. These are individuals for whom holding onto housing might require a lot of support. Housing 1000 of our most vulnerable neighbors is something to be celebrated!

Meanwhile, Housing Matters runs nine different programs carefully designed to connect people with housing. We end or prevent homelessness for over 300 people each year. And again, we're just one organization working on the issue in our county.

People are getting out of homelessness and into housing every. single. day. It takes a tremendous amount of work and support. And yet they're doing it. WE — as a community — are doing it. It's beautiful and inspiring and transformational.

But.

We're not doing enough

As long as there are people experiencing life without a home in our community, our work will not be done. And "our" means "the entire community." Yes, that includes you, dear reader.

All the hand wringing in the world won't solve homelessness. It is far past time to take more meaningful action. But it is not too late.

Community members can be part of the solution by getting curious, getting informed, and getting involved.

Challenge your own assumptions, and those around you. Ask yourself why you hold the beliefs you do. Dig deep.

When more questions bubble to the surface, get answers. Our Get Informed online library is a great place to start. Call up the agencies working on the issue and ask them your questions. Call on your elected officials.

And don't be afraid to get involved. Take a tour of our campus (virtual tours coming soon!), volunteer with a local nonprofit, donate. Become an advocate and speak up whenever you have an opportunity.

There are community-wide short-term and long-term solutions that need to be enacted, today. There's progress being made, but we need more community will and more political will to make the type of progress that will truly end homelessness in Santa Cruz County.

Short-term solutions

Sanctioned, transitional encampments are an important part of the short-term solution. (Sidebar: focusing the conversation solely around this strategy, as we tend to do, makes the assumption that encampments are an inevitability. If we only plan for encampments and do not focus on longer term solutions — real, accessible housing — we will not make the progress necessary to end homelessness in Santa Cruz County.)

The City and County of Santa Cruz have both tried to site sanctioned encampments throughout our county, repeatedly, for years. But nobody wants an encampment in their neighborhood. And as long as the community is lukewarm about these strategies, implementing them will be close to impossible.

Encampments can be done well; we saw this at 1220 River Street last year. With supportive services and case management that helps people into a fixed place to call home, managed encampments can truly be transitional and transformational for an unhoused neighbor, and in turn, the entire community.

Write to elected officials and tell them that you don't want unmanaged camping scattered all over the place. Tell them you want people sleeping outside to have a safe, healthy, managed place to go —and that you want the safe, managed sites to be in thoughtfully-selected sites that will work for the housed and unsheltered residents in our community. And then, when a site is proposed in your neighborhood, say, 'Let's manage it well and make it work.'

Long-term solutions

Long-term solutions are being worked on across the county, but we certainly need more of them. Housing Matters works on long-term solutions by connecting people with stable housing, but there are long wait lists for all of our programs. We simply don't have the capacity to serve everyone who needs help.

Focus Strategies has outlined the current state of our county's homelessness response, including strengths and gaps in a baseline system assessment.

At Housing Matters, we run four shelters. In our 35 years of operations, we have learned that not all shelter is created equal. The best model is shelters that function as a pathway to housing — that is, shelters that provide all the robust support and human connection that a person needs to move from shelter into housing, thus ending their experience of homelessness.

We need more of this type of emergency shelter in our community; until local homelessness is truly resolved, we need to be able to provide people with shelter while supporting them in ending their homelessness with housing. In fact, this model can even be applied at encampments. Transitional encampments are only transitional if we are, indeed, helping people transition out of homelessness.

Creating more housing is, of course, a long-term solution that needs to be a countywide priority. You can encourage this by telling your local elected officials that you support more affordable housing.

We also just need more services. There are plenty of nonprofits and government agencies doing life-changing work, but the capacity isn't there to support everyone who needs it. Supporting these nonprofits in expanding their services (yes, that means donating!) can be helpful. And, of course, community members can always stay involved with their local government, supporting their efforts to continue to improve the system of care for our unhoused neighbors.

Don't delay

In 2020, we've seen our community rally together like never before. Crises tend to bring out the best in people. And homelessness is, truly, a crisis. It often feels like an inevitable part of life. But it deserves to be responded to like the crisis it is.

Once you've figured out your role in resolving homelessness, don't delay. Each one of us can make a difference. And it will benefit our entire community.

Written by Cassie Blom, Asst. Director of Communications

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