

Push to connect homeless youth to host families

Nonprofit Bill Wilson Center to introduce program to Santa Cruz

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SANTA CRUZ — A nonprofit is working to create inroads in Santa Cruz County to link homeowners and their spare bedrooms to local youth experiencing homelessness.

Santa Clara-based Bill Wilson Center, founded in 1973, helps offer a short-term stop for young adults, connecting them with host families serving as mentors, said organization CEO Sparky Harlan. This week, the organization is moving south, offering public informational events on Tuesday and Thursday night by way of introduction to the Santa Cruz community.

“We know that Santa Cruz is such a tight housing market, just like Santa Clara County is, where we’ve been doing this program,” Harlan said. “But we also know that people might have a spare bedroom and may be thinking, ‘Well, what can I do with this bedroom. Do I want to rent it out?’ And maybe this is sort of that interim step where they can say, let me try something for three months and see how it goes.”

The new-to-Santa Cruz program is similar to a less structured effort by UC Santa Cruz officials in recent years. As recently as last summer, [university officials emailed faculty and staff](#), asking them to open their homes to students. The Housing Authority of Santa Cruz County also rolled out a [Landlord Incentive Program](#) last year with a security fund to offset risk concerns for property owners looking to accept tenants with federally subsidized housing vouchers.

STARTING YOUNG

With recent [state and federal homelessness grants](#) offsetting the cost, the Bill Wilson Center will pay a modest rent for a young person to stay in a host home for an average of 3 to 6 months, with each young person continually connected with so-called wrap-around services such as case management, mental health, outpatient health, transportation, job search guidance and legal services. Host families also are able to reach out to Bill Wilson Center employees whenever problems arise, said Harlan, who lives in Santa Clara County but owns a second home in Felton.

“So, you’re not only opening your home to somebody that you’re renting to, but we hope that you’ll establish sort of a big sister/brother relationship to help mentor that person as they’re trying to find their way into housing long-term,” Harlan said.

Harlan added that trained host families are not expected to serve as “a counselor or a parent,” but are encouraged to be available to the young person in a way similar to what happens with exchange student programs: providing a safe environment, support for personal goals and a connection to the community. In Santa Clara County, the Bill Wilson Center has gone a step further, focusing its efforts on young people and hosts identifying as LGBTQ, among other underrepresented groups, and Harlan said she would encourage LGBTQ hosts to step into the host role in Santa Cruz, as well.

“More and more, we know that if we want to end chronic homelessness, we need to first start with young people,” said Harlan. “Young people are still hopeful, they’re looking for work, they often just need some help and a leg up. So this is a way we can help young people to move on to permanent housing situation and not fall into long-term homelessness.”

HOUSING ENVIRONMENT

Findings of a 2017 homelessness census showed that Santa Cruz had the highest rate, at 98 percent, of its homeless youth who were unsheltered, compared to small cities and counties across the nation.

The county also ranked second among similarly sized areas for its outright number of homeless youth counted — 586, according to a 2017 U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development’s report. Limited information released by Santa Cruz County on a similar January 2019 census showed Santa Cruz County’s homeless youth population has increased in the past two years, county spokesman Jason Hoppin said earlier this month.

“I know that we have an economic system that is colliding with a housing market that is unforgiving, and it’s unforgiving to the most vulnerable members of our community,” Hoppin said, speculating on the rise in homeless Santa Cruz County young people tallied. “That includes youth – student homelessness at universities is not unusual anymore (now) that the prices locally are unattainable, particularly for people that are starting out in their careers or are enrolled in school.”

Santa Cruz County qualified as one of 10 communities chosen in 2016 to take on the [Youth Homeless Demonstration Grant](#), which pulled together young people with homelessness experiences to plot out strategies for addressing the problem. The Bill Wilson Center was one of the beneficiaries, with about \$200,000 set aside for two years of the host home program.

IF YOU GO

What: Shared Housing Summit

Tuesday: 6 to 8 p.m., Santa Cruz Museum of Art & History, 705 Front St.

Thursday: 6 to 8 p.m., Santa Cruz Public Library Downtown, 224 Church St.

At issue: New homeless youth host home program.

Information: billwilsoncenter.org, cplatt@bwcmail.org.