

South Bay homeless advocates try all-in-one approach

**By Stephen Baxter
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When the National Guard Armory on Sunnyvale's East Maude Avenue opened its doors as a cold-weather shelter on Nov. 30, Carlton Mobley was there, setting up sleeping mats, tables and chairs.

About a year ago, he was sleeping in a shelter in San Jose after living on the streets and struggling with drug addiction.

With help from EHC Lifebuilders — which runs the Sunnyvale shelter — and "by the grace of God," as he puts it, Mobley now has a place to live and a job at the Sunnyvale armory.

Part of the reason he changed his life is that Mobley was not just another person on a mat, but a case that EHC staff followed with "wraparound" services at its One Stop Homeless Prevention Center.

Rather than just providing a safe place to rest and a hot meal, receptionists at the center on Little Orchard Street in San Jose can help clients register for veterans' benefits, food stamps and many other services in one office. In the past, people had to trek to different parts of the county by bus to register for food stamps, veteran's medical services and job-hunting classes.

Many people still crisscross the county, but the center is an attempt to cluster the services in one place.

It is getting some results.

The staff's goal was to find permanent housing for 100 people in 12 months, and they found homes for 180.

Jenny Nicklaus, the CEO of EHC Lifebuilders, said that having county and federal agencies under one roof has made it simpler for people to access benefits that often had been underused.

In the 2009 Santa Clara County Homeless Census and Survey, 49 percent of those surveyed received no government assistance — partly because they weren't being connected to programs.

"Having a center like this gives them access to public benefits," Nicklaus said. "We want to always be here for them with safety and dignity and respect," Nicklaus said.

Although there are about 7,000 homeless in San Jose every night, not every person seeks out help.

"It depends on the person. When you bring a person in who's been living outside, they need to trust us.... With some people it's a very quick process; for others it takes a year. It's just a matter of making that decision," she said.

The center can provide a longer relationship than a temporary shelter, and it can yield life-changing results for people.

Mobley's story Fifty-one-year-old Carlton Mobley is an Army veteran from south Philadelphia.

After his military discharge years ago, he moved to the Bay Area and found work as a spot welder. He married and had children, but he nurtured an addiction to crack cocaine. He said he was always the "black sheep" in his family, and his life began to unravel.

He speaks softly today about his past, and his dark brown eyes penetrate the listener. He is trim and tall, and he wears a close beard that is starting to gray and a stud earring.

"I lost my house, I lost my car, my family didn't want to have anything to do with me," Mobley said.

As his drug addiction grew, Mobley collected unemployment checks and panhandled, and he slept in a makeshift hut near the Caltrain tracks in San Jose.

"The pain went away when I had drugs, and I think I got more drugs when I was broke then when I had money," he said. "People would come by and say, 'I remember when you got me high,' and they'd get me high," he said.

But the relief was fleeting and the nights were cold. He became skinny and malnourished. He felt his life was at a dead end.

Then he said he heard a voice that told him to leave the rail yard. Weakened from drug use, he said he packed his duffel bag and backpack and left his encampment. When he returned, Union Pacific Railroad workers had demolished his hut in a routine sweep.

With nowhere to go, he found a CityTeam Ministries men's shelter and began to regroup.

It felt good to take a shower and sleep in a bed, he said, and he ended up staying for a few weeks in the shelter. Mobley heard about the One-Stop Center on Little Orchard Street, and he went there and signed up for some veterans' medical benefits that he didn't know existed.

Mobley had a prior drug conviction, so he enrolled in California's Proposition 36 program. The program essentially allows first- and second-time nonviolent drug offenders receive substance abuse treatment instead of prison time.

After he graduated from the program, he returned to court. Mobley said the judge was so impressed by his progress that he came down from the bench and hugged him.

He worked for a time in the kitchen at the Boccardo Reception center next to the One-Stop center, and he has now started his job at the Sunnyvale armory.

Mobley lives in transitional veterans housing in downtown San Jose, and his next goal is to find his own apartment and buy a car. He also finished writing a book about his life.

"I wanted to make changes, and EHC is a life-building program, I can testify to that," he said.

"I realized I was the only one holding myself down....A dream is only as powerful as you believe it to be," he said.

'Holistic approach'

Michelle Ogburn, the program manager of the One-Stop center, said that they have learned some lessons in its first year — and she reiterated many of the workers' appreciation of having many agencies in one place.

The center is spartan, with a linoleum floor and offices for social workers, cubicles, a public computer lab for job searches and other purposes.

There is a small lounge outside where one man was reading a book on a recent afternoon.

For a short time after the center opened, clients made appointments for different offices in the building.

Because of how difficult it is for the homeless to get places, that system was abandoned in favor of a drop-in schedule.

Next to the One-stop center is a temporary shelter, and roughly 250 people sleep there on a typical night.

On Nov. 30, dozens of people lined up outside the shelter on Little Orchard Street to participate in a lottery for 75 beds.

They put white identification cards in a bucket, and waited for their name to be called. It was mostly men who waited — white, black, Latino, Asian — ranging in age from their 20s to their 70s. Some sat in wheelchairs. Others puffed cigarettes and read paperbacks.

When one man's name was called, he shouted, "Yes!" and held his arms out eagerly to be frisked and wanded with a metal detector to be let in to the shelter.

Like the others, his bag was searched and given back to him.

"There will be turnaways tonight," Ogburn said, judging the crowd.

She said a lottery is better than a first-come, first-serve system because people would congregate there all day to wait for a bed — and that wouldn't be productive for them or the center.

One man in line said he was a Navy veteran.

Staring up from weary eyes under a blue baseball cap, he said he was pipe fitter before he was laid off about a year ago. He found another job, and was laid off. Then another job, laid off. Now he said he is trying to network with other veterans and find a new job. He fiddled nervously with a cigarette.

The center is in an office and industrial part of town near Highway 87 and Curtner Avenue. Its neighbors are a transmission shop across the street and a Home Depot a few blocks away across train tracks.

Leaders at the center hope to expand further back in to the vast building in the future, and Ogburn said it would be helpful to add a place for psychological evaluations so that clients wouldn't have to visit another office across town to start receiving Supplemental Security Income (SSI) benefits.

"It would be nice to get that centralized," Ogburn said.

Also, she added, her new challenge is fostering a community for the formerly homeless in San Jose. Now that they have a job and an apartment, often they still need friends and support to keep it going.

"We've had some pretty big successes in the past year, but we need to continue those services after they're housed," Ogburn said.

Nicklaus, the CEO of EHC Lifebuilders, said that in the long run, one-stop centers like these are cheaper for cities and counties than some alternatives for taxpayers.

When the homeless go to hospital emergency rooms, for example, or come in contact with police, courts and jail, it adds up, Nicklaus said.

"The One-Stop is focused on making permanent solutions for people, so that we can be solving the problem," she said.



People line up early for a warm place to sleep at the EHC Lifebuilders shelter located at the Boccardo Reception Center in San Jose. (photo Jacqueline Ramseyer/SVCN/November 30, 2009)

Carlton Mobley, 51, got himself off drugs and into a new job and home with the help of EHC Lifebuilders One-Stop Homelessness Prevention Center. (photo Jacqueline Ramseyer/SVCN/November 30, 2009)



Social Worker Jesse Mendez listens to a client at EHC Lifebuilders One-Stop Homelessness Prevention Center located at Boccardo Reception Center in San Jose. (photo Jacqueline Ramseyer/SVCN/November 30, 2009)

Carlton Mobley, 51, got himself off drugs and into a new job and home with the help of EHC Lifebuilders One-Stop Homelessness Prevention Center. (photo Jacqueline Ramseyer/SVCN/November 30, 2009)

