

Pacific Sun (Mill Valley, California)
December 5, 2008 - December 11, 2008

Ghosts of Christmas present

BYLINE: Peter Seidman

While some in Mann shop for cool deals, others scour for warm beds...

It's been said by people ranging from Gandhi to popes to politicians: The true measure of a society's value is how it takes care of its weakest, its young, its old, its poor, its sick.

In the middle of a county that has the state's highest median annual income (\$116,000), people who find themselves homeless live in encampments hidden from view. We pass those who live in encampments, in anchor-outs on the bay and on the streets every day on the sidewalk. They are neighbors as much as the families who live in the multimillion-dollar dream homes that wind up on the pages of Architectural Digest. And the numbers of homeless people, as well as those who live on the edge, are not insignificant in Marin.

It's often the working poor who are without a permanent home. And in Marin, that term is relative. Recently, the Insight Center for Community Economic Development—a national nonprofit organization that focuses on research, consulting and legal issues relating to "building economic health in vulnerable communities"—developed a new tool to gauge how many people are at risk. The organization is a conglomeration of providers, civic leaders and politicians who see homelessness as one of our major problems. To foster an inclusive society that acknowledges the needs of its weakest, Insight works to "develop and promote innovative solutions that help people and communities become, and remain, economically secure." The idea is to provide the necessary tools for the weakest elements of society to advance toward a more comfortable self-sufficiency.

The new demographic tool gauges what it takes to make ends meet. It offers a startling snapshot of a county that many view as over-privileged and without serious problems, especially when viewed from the comfort of a plush living room in a home on a hill. The views may be panoramic up on the hill, but the location, both physical and psychical, obscures a harsh reality.

Previous tools used by government agencies have been woefully inadequate, as are the programs in the county and its cities designed to help the homeless. The need exceeds the current resources.

The Insight family economic self-sufficiency standard calculates what it takes for working families to meet just the basic needs of living in every California county. The standard takes into account the number of adults and children living in a household, as well as the ages of the children. Calculating the cost of daily necessities, such as rent or mortgage, childcare, food, healthcare, etc., the **self-sufficiency standard** provides a picture far more accurate, and reality based, than the federal poverty standard.

Using a household with a single adult, one preschool child and one school-age child as a benchmark, it's easy to see the depth of the situation in Marin. According to the numbers compiled in the **self-sufficiency standard**, that single adult living with two kids in Marin has to earn \$66,560 each year just to meet basic needs. That's the equivalent of four full-time jobs that pay a minimum wage of \$8 an hour, or \$16,640 a year. The federal poverty level is an unrealistic \$17,600 a year. And the CalWORKs estimation isn't any more realistic. CalWORKs is a program that provides financial help and services to households with children that earn an income below state poverty levels. To qualify for CalWORKs with food stamp benefits that same three-person household cannot earn more than \$10,392 a year.

"The self-sufficiency matrix measures just the basics," stresses Lisa Sepahi, a policy analyst with the county. "It doesn't count things like not having a vacation and some of those little luxuries that many of us have come to enjoy."

All it takes is a look at some census data, Sepahi adds, to see that "we're talking about a third of the people in our county who are living below the self-sufficiency standard for their households." That has to be a rough estimate, she says, because of the nature of census data; but it's a good estimate, and it's stark. It also puts into perspective some of those NIMBY conversations often heard when an affordable housing project comes before a planning commission or a city council. When affordable-housing advocates lobby for more units, they now have a new tool to put the need in perspective.

The **self-sufficiency standard**, which Insight released just this year, says Sepahi, "lets us put things in perspective. It helps us understand that population that's at risk." Previously, planners and providers may have looked at the federal poverty level for the same purpose. But, as Sepahi notes, "who can live in a three-person household on \$17,000 a year?"

When families fall below the self-sufficiency level, it's not hard for them to lose a home. Every two years Marin takes a one-day count of the homeless population as part of a federal Housing and Urban Development requirement. According to the figures collected in the count in January 2007, there were 1,338 homeless people in Marin. But that number represents a serious undercount, say advocates for the homeless. Parents who have children in school, for instance, are reluctant to let word out that the family is without a home. Some parents worry their children will be taken from them if authorities learn the family is homeless. And many people, families and single adults, shy away from having their numbers counted because of a continuing stigma attached to poverty and homelessness. Although schoolchildren are difficult to tally, in the next one-day count, which will take place Jan. 29, the county has set up relationships with schools and school programs to get as accurate a measure as possible.

Other subgroups of the homeless population also are not included in the official count for HUD. "Couch surfers" technically have a roof over their heads, but if they lose their positions as house sitters, they become members of the chronic homeless population.

Sepahi stresses that the count represents just a snapshot of the homeless population and on just one day. After counting the people who turn up in the homeless shelters and programs in the county, of which there are a considerable but inadequate number, the one-day count is

like the tip of an iceberg. Sepahi estimates that if about 1,300 people are counted, there actually could be "several thousand" who are or have been homeless during the year. And when the at-risk population living near or below the **self-sufficiency standard** is included, the numbers of homeless people in Marin and those at risk of becoming homeless, reaches a daunting level.

Many concerned Marin residents and organizations work diligently to help these weakest members of society. Project Homeless Connect is one of those efforts. It's a program modeled on San Francisco Mayor Gavin Newsom's project. The program creates a workshop atmosphere for a day in which the homeless and agencies that provide services can connect, hence the title.

In December 2007, MarinLink, a small organization dedicated to social justice issues, played a key role in conducting the first Project Homeless Connect in Marin. Although MarinLink and the other sponsors of the event estimated that between 50 and 100 people in need would attend, 200 showed up. That first program in Marin was a pilot project to determine whether the need was sufficient to continue holding events. It was. Another Project Homeless Connect took place in May in Novato, and yet another one happened earlier this month in Sausalito. About 50 homeless people, including some anchor-outs, whom HUD considers homeless if their boats do not have electricity or running water, showed up for the Sausalito session. "We always consider it a success if people show up and get connected," says Mary O'Mara, the only paid staff member at MarinLink, which has an office in the Northgate Mall. Another Project Homeless Connect will take place Jan. 29 to coincide with the one-day count. (The event, at the First Presbyterian Church, 1510 Fifth Ave. in San Rafael, will start at around 10am and run until about 2pm, says O'Mara. For more information, call MarinLink at 415/472-0211.)

MarinLink also plays a key role in a program called Warm Wishes. On Dec. 6, volunteers will fill 5,000 backpacks with new gloves, socks, a cap, a rain poncho and a holiday card. The backpacks will be distributed to the homeless. Warm Wishes needs monetary contributions, says O'Mara; it's going to take \$35,000 to fill those backpacks. Anyone wanting to volunteer for the backpack-stuffing event can go to Unity of Marin, 600 Palm Drive, Novato, from 8am until noon.

Service providers have an urgency in their collective voice this year as the one-day count comes closer. Many of them are expecting the numbers of homeless people in the county to increase over the 2007 count—a natural and depressing result of the economic crisis and the burst housing bubble. O'Mara says she already is seeing anecdotal evidence. "We have had organizations say, 'We will take as many backpacks as you can give us.' We had one local organization that said they would take 1,000. The demand is completely up for the backpacks this year."

Mary Kay Sweeney at Homeward Bound is seeing the same thing. "We're getting more calls for night-to-night services than we have had before, sometimes from people who have never really been homeless before. Maybe they were renting a place from someone whose house was foreclosed on; that creates a problem. We also have many, many families on our waiting

list just to get into our emergency shelter." That, unfortunately, is nothing new for the homeless situation in Marin, but this year the statistics could be particularly troubling.

Homeward Bound is the largest provider of shelter and services to homeless families and adults in Marin, but several other organizations serve the needs of the homeless. Anyone looking for a rundown of agencies involved in the task of providing services can go to www.marin.org/comres/homeless.cfm for contact information.

In addition to the emergency services Homeward Bound provides, the organization also has a short-term and a longterm transitional program. These are designed to help families and individuals learn skills, deal with health problems and confront other issues that may be keeping them in the at-risk population. Homeward Bound just a few weeks ago opened a long-term transitional project, Next Key, in Hamilton in Novato. The project includes 32 studio units that rent at below-market rates. Four of the units are for families, the rest for single adults. "To qualify for this housing," says Sweeney, "people have to have a plan to learn a trade or go to school or receive more training at their place of business to become larger wage earners than they are right now." The program accepts people for two years, giving them the time to chart a new course while they stay in the below-market units.

When asked what Marin needs to make a dent in the homeless population, Sweeney hesitates not a second: "We need more affordable housing. If we open more shelters, we'll fill them. But we don't have anyplace to put people after the shelter programs. People back up in shelters, and there's no place for them to move forward." Into affordable housing, for instance. That takes a new focus, one often at odds with the rampant NIMBY sentiment in the county. Nevertheless, a concerted effort among agencies across the country, including Marin, is focused on "trying to end homelessness, not manage it," says Sweeney.

Last year Supervisor Susan Adams visited an encampment of homeless people within sight of multimillion-dollar homes. The people in the homes couldn't see the encampment because a canopy of trees hid it. "But," says Adams, "it was there nonetheless." The homeless population may not be as visible as it is in San Francisco, for instance, but it's here, and homeless people in Marin "are really struggling. The visible chronic homeless is just one small part of the problem." Insight's **self-sufficiency standard** proves that assessment.

Adams says she will go out into the homeless community again in January during the one-day count. When she went out last time, she visited a woman in her 60s in an encampment in Madrone Canyon that overlooked Larkspur. "She came out after Katrina. She had lost everything, and the promise of housing didn't materialize and she didn't have anyplace to go. A nurse, the woman had a hip replacement and was disabled. Because she couldn't work, she ended up living in a small tent overlooking Larkspur.

"What does that say," asks Adams, "about how we take care of our aging seniors who have contributed and who now are living on the margins?" If the true value of a society is measured by how it cares for its young, its old, its poor and its sick, the answer is evident.

That's not to say everyone is turning a blind eye. A group of people connected with the Marin Organizing Committee is trying to find a way to add a wet shelter to the roster of services for

the homeless in Marin [See Overheard, p. 13]. "We're entering into the cold and wet season of winter," says Adams, "and 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."