



Technical Assistance to Support Homeless System Planning and Improvement in Santa Cruz County SUMMARY NOTES FROM SHELTER FOCUS GROUPS

To inform the work of the Housing-Focused Shelter Work Group, Focus Strategies facilitated focus groups with people living in shelters in Santa Cruz County. Twenty-six people participated in three focus groups, held at Salvation Army/Laurel Street, AFC Mobile Shelter/St. Joseph's, and Pajaro Valley Shelter Services. Demographics of the focus group participants are provided at the end of this summary.

Participants were asked about their experiences in shelter, what assistance they had received, and what they thought would be most useful to help themselves or people like them to leave shelters more quickly and to gain housing.

A. Experiences with becoming homeless/losing housing

- Approximately one third of the people in the Adult shelters were in shelter for the first time and had only stayed in the shelter they were currently in; roughly two-thirds had been homeless longer and reported staying in at least one other shelter or being unsheltered.
- Among families, only one reported staying in other shelters before coming to the place they were staying.
- Several people spoke about having previously had housing and having the rent raised or being evicted; One person had previously been rapidly rehoused and was homeless again.
- Two people said they currently have Section 8 and are looking for housing but cannot find anything and are in danger of losing their subsidy.

B. Experiences in shelter and seeking assistance

- Participants in family shelter said they were receiving help to get housing, though most anticipated (or had already gotten) transitional housing as a next step; some were new to shelter and did not know what to expect in the way of help.
- In adult shelter, people did not report having someone within the shelter working with them on housing; some had gotten connected to services through another entity, especially the Downtown Street team, the Library and/or the Health Department.
- Nearly everyone (adults and families) expressed the impression there are lots of services but no one knows about them all – there is not enough information about programs, how to get into housing, and no one place where all info available. There was an Impression that what you get depends a lot on whether you are lucky and find out about things from someone.
- Several people talked about quality of life issues in shelter related to the mixture of people in shelter and there being low expectations of behavior in shelters.
- Some reported that people who are undocumented don't qualify for a lot of the services that are available.

- A few people who were familiar with services in other communities (Santa Clara, San Mateo and San Francisco) said there were fewer supports available in shelter in Santa Cruz county.

C. Things that would be most helpful/most needed. (*Italicized items were most commonly cited*).

- **Advocates:** Nearly all participants in Adult shelter said there need to be Advocates/Case Managers for everyone. They said it was inconsistent whether someone is assigned a Case Manager or Advocate and that whether you have one makes a big difference in terms of securing the help you need. Getting access to services and housing depends a lot on having someone working with you. Some said there used to be people who came into the shelter to offer help but don't anymore.
- **Better information:** Nearly all participants (families and adults) said there needs to be better and more consistent information available to shelter residents. No one knows what is available. Residents get different information depending on where they go and who they talk to. There should be better and more consistent information sharing and updated information, and/or one place you can go to learn about what there is and about how to get into housing, especially affordable housing.
- **Deeper and longer rental assistance:** Many mentioned a need for more rental assistance funding – Section 8 cannot pay enough, needs an increment, and RRH is not long enough. There needs to be more affordable housing in general.
- **Help finding landlords:** Some thought it would be helpful to have a program to identify landlords who will rent to people also that will not raise rents when program is over. Helpful to have listings of landlords who will take people who are/have been homeless.
- **Flexible financial assistance:** People were mixed on whether there is a need for more financial assistance for short term needs such as applications, deposits, etc. Some said this would be helpful, but many said that type of funding already exists, particularly for families, and that this is not where the biggest gap is.
- **Longer stays in shelter/more transitional programs:** Some mentioned favorable impressions or experiences with longer programs that provide more time and more support for gaining work.
- **Work trade or other sharing options:** Some people suggested a facilitated work/rent swap program where people could help a homeowner, and/or more shared housing or communal living options.
- **Basic services:** Many adults said there is a large need for more basic services – showers, laundry, toilets – and that people can't seek housing or work if can't get clean. Some also mentioned the need for travel support such as bus passes. These are available for medical appointments but not to look for work or housing.
- **More treatment/sober living, sober shelters:** Several people said there needs to be treatment options available, though they were usually speaking about what they perceived as other people's needs. Several thought there should be different places for people who are not using substances and don't have mental health needs.
- **More regular consultation with service users:** Some people mentioned that people who use services are not consulted with enough or listened to in their experience of the programs and felt more user input needs to be built into programs and the system overall.

Characteristics of Focus Group Participants

At each of the three focus groups, participants were asked to fill out a brief anonymous survey that asked for demographic information and questions relevant to their current homeless situation. A total of 26 participants completed the survey. Average age of participants was 41 years of age, with a range of 19 to 74 years of age. The median length of time in shelter was four months, while the median time homeless was 10 months. Additional data is presented in the table below.

Demographic Characteristic	Number	Percent
Household Type		
Adult	17	65%
Family	9	35%
Gender		
Female	16	61%
Male	9	35%
Other	1	4%
Race		
Black/African American	4	15%
Latino/Hispanic	9	35%
White/Caucasian	10	38%
Native American	1	4%
Asian/Pacific Islander	N/A	0%
Mixed Race/Ethnicity	2	8%
Primary Language		
English	22	85%
Spanish	1	4%
Other	3	11%
Number of Children (families only)		
One child	2	22%
Two children	5	56%
Three children	2	22%
Time in this shelter		
1 month or less	5	20%
> 1 month to 6 months	12	48%
> 6 months to 1 year	4	16%
> 1 year	4	16%
Time Homeless		
6 months or less	9	38%
> 6 months to 1 year	4	17%
>1 to 2 years	3	12%
>2 to 5 years	3	12%
> 5 years	5	21%