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Why Do People Become Homeless & How Can You Help?



A homeless encampment in the Bay Area.

Driving through Contra Costa County, it's impossible not to notice the staggering number of people experiencing homelessness. Whether it be the sight of tents dotting the highways, a person using drugs in broad daylight, or someone in a severe mental health crisis yelling to themselves in the street, it leaves many of us wondering, "How does someone get to that point? What we can do to help?"

The National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty, released a study identifying the causes of homelessness. They identified housing costs, mental illness, and addiction as some of the main drivers of homelessness. While new resources are being implemented to tackle them, the solutions don't seem to be readily available. What can one person do to help? St. Vincent de Paul (SVdP) is leading the way by providing compassion and assistance. There is help available for many people who are living on the streets, but much of it requires they know where it is and how to access it. SVdP hosts a daytime homeless shelter at our SVdP Family Resource Center in Pittsburg, in partnership with Winter Nights. SVdP distributes \$1.8 million each year to families in need, in an effort to help families stay in their homes.

"People on the street drift around like tumbleweeds. They bounce around, unnoticed or avoided, until they brush up against something and get stuck," Stephen Krank, SVdP Vincentian Services Manager said. "At SVdP, we're lucky enough to be able to help people when they brush up against us. It's hard work, but it's rewarding. The alternative isn't an option. It isn't harm reduction to let someone suffer on the street."

For people experiencing homelessness due to mental health or substance abuse issues, the help available requires that they recognize they have a problem, and be capable of asking for help.

"You can end up in a Catch-22 situation if you're on the street due to mental health issues," Stephen said. "There's help available, but if you're mental illness is so severe that you can't recognize you need help, it can be almost impossible to get any."

If someone experiencing homelessness needs help, their best course of action is to call 211 to be connected to services that might be able to help them. This requires access to a phone, and be in stable enough condition to

Continued on Page 2



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Make Your Legacy One of Compassion



Claudia L. Ramirez
Executive Director

Contra Costa County tells a story. When you drive along the highways that crisscross the vastly different cities, you are treated to some of the most beautiful hills, luxurious homes, and heart-breaking displays of poverty.

I think about where I fit into this story, both as a Vincentian and as the Executive Director of St Vincent de Paul of Contra Costa County (SVdP), and how I can leave a more lasting impact on the lives of those in need.

Last year, thanks to the overwhelming generosity of a small number of people, SVdP was able to build and open the Dentist on Wheels Pittsburg Free Dental Clinic at St. Vincent de Paul, the only free dental clinic in the county for the uninsured. The free dental clinic already has a wait-list of more than 300 names. Dental Clinic patients' lives have been forever impacted by the generous donors who helped SVdP build and keep supporting the clinic.

I have met many people whose lives have been changed by the free dental clinic. From a refugee family fleeing Afghanistan to a mother fleeing domestic violence, both

helped in life-changing ways through work performed at the dental clinic. I witnessed volunteer dentists repairing teeth for SVdP's Workforce Development participants.

Each of these people, and countless more, have already had their lives touched by the free dental clinic and the support from our Vincentians at the conference who referred them.

In thinking about my own legacy, I have made plans to designate SVdP of Contra Costa as a beneficiary of my estate. I have seen the life-changing impact SVdP has on the lives of our most vulnerable and want to see that continue. Won't you join me? I'd love to host you for a tour of the SVdP Family Resource Center, where you can see how your bequest can have life-changing results for so many.

If you'd like schedule a tour, or are considering leaving a gift in your will to SVdP, please call me at (925) 635-3219 or email at c.ramirez@svdp-cc.org.

Blessings to you and your family,



At 38 years old, Victor Reynoso visits SVdP daily for food, hygiene items, clothing, or for the Saturday free shower program.

Continued from Page 1

stay put while the County’s homeless response team responds. Even then, the amount of help received may be limited due to lack of shelter availability.

Victor Reynoso is all smiles when he visits the Free Dining Room at St. Vincent de Paul – a partnership with Loaves and Fishes of Contra Costa. He visits the free dining room daily to receive a hot meal, and he stops by the SVdP Emergency Food Pantry for snacks and hygiene items. Victor is always kind and thankful when he receives anything. Victor currently wears a medical wrist band from a recent hospital visit. Victor is living on the streets in the middle of a mental health crisis.

“I needed to see a doctor for medicine,” Victor said. “My body hurts because I did drugs before, and I hear voices and noises in my head that I need medicine for.”

Victor said he was born and raised in Pittsburg. He said he graduated from high school in Pittsburg in 2002. It can be hard to get a lot of detail about Victor’s life from him, he has a hard time conveying things, but he has no problem telling you how thankful he is.

“I get food at SVdP, everyone is really nice,” Victor said. “They’re really funny, they make me smile a lot.” For Victor, SVdP represents a stable environment where

he can receive food regularly, as well as clothing and hygiene items so he can care for himself while on the street. SVdP also offers the Free Hot Shower Program on Saturdays, a partnership with The Bay Church, providing homeless people a hot shower and new undergarments and a fresh set of clothing. Help is available for Victor, but to access that help requires Victor to personally ask for it, something he may not be capable of doing.

Victor is but one of many faces SVdP volunteers see every day. Emotionally, it can be hard to see someone like Victor out on the street, but it can also be very rewarding to be able to help people like him maintain a level of comfort and dignity while they are struggling with homelessness. Even though many experiencing homelessness are currently finding it difficult to find a place off the streets, when they come to SVdP they are able to receive help, love and understanding.

“As volunteers, we can’t solve every one’s homelessness or mental health problems,” Stephen said. “What we can do is to help lessen the suffering of the most vulnerable. People like Victor need help, and we shouldn’t condemn them to carry this cross alone.”

We will continue to advocate on Victor’s behalf to connect him to a permanent home and the help he needs.

From Needing Help to Being a Helper

The strength of St. Vincent de Paul of Contra Costa County is the ability of its volunteers to comprehensively help neighbors in need. Remi Martin first came to SVdP to join the Workforce Development Program, the job training program for those with barriers to employment, but she found herself connected to a community that wanted to help her.

“I was in a bad situation. I had no job, I couldn’t pay my bills,” Remi said. “I had no insurance. I had holes in my teeth that the free dental clinic at SVdP is helping me with. I’ve been unable to chew on my right for the last two years.”

Remi worked for a manufacturing company in the Bay Area, but experienced a hostile workplace and felt compelled to leave. After her unemployment was cut off, she found herself unable to pay her rent, and with no hot water.

“Working here at SVdP has been helping me,” Remi said. “When I came here I had so much anger and didn’t talk, but people here are so nice and I’m able to open up to people in a way I haven’t before. There has been a lot of emotional help.”

Remi said she loves the WFD program. She said she is learning new skills, but mostly she enjoys helping people.

“I love working here. I’m learning new skills, like using a cash register. I had a couple of hiccups but I really got the hang of it now,” Remi said. “Most of all I really like helping people. Like when homeless people come in and we can get them a new set of clothes. It really feels good.”

Remi graduated from the SVdP workforce program in August, finding a new job at \$25 per hour.



Remi Martin sorts clothing at an SVdP Thrift Store.

Migrant Community Finds Safety at SVdP Free Medical Clinic

When Anthony felt an intense pain in his abdomen, he did not go see a doctor because he lacks health insurance. Anthony did the only thing he could– he got back to work and hoped the pain would go away. Anthony’s pain persisted. Luckily, he knew of the RotaCare Pittsburg Free Medical Clinic at St. Vincent de Paul.



Anthony prepares for his appointment with Marta, a translator at the free clinic.

“If I am sick, I hope it goes away,” Anthony said. “If I have to, I go to the ER, but it’s so expensive. I’m thankful through God this clinic is here. The free clinic has done so much for me. The doctors and nurses are very kind. They provide translators. I feel heard here.”

Doctors used an ultrasound to find the cause of his pain, and diagnosed him with diabetes. They gave Anthony medication, a glucometer and health education to manage his diabetes. According to Sutter Health, this would cost an uninsured patient \$1,137, more than Anthony’s weekly pay.

“It’s really hard to find a doctor without insurance. I hadn’t seen one in four years,” Anthony said. “There are a lot of people in my community who avoid hospitals because they’re immigrants. They work hard, but are afraid. But here people know they’re safe. I’m so grateful for this clinic.”

Anthony came to the United States 25 years ago, to make a better life for himself. Without his family, Anthony said his community is important to him, and he feels the volunteers at the clinic are part of his community.