

## Marin religious community provides shelter to homeless

By Richard Halstead

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Toni Vazquez slept on the floor of San Rafael First United Methodist Church Thursday night and got a more restful sleep than she would have in her car or tent - her only other sources of shelter.

"We had pajamas last night that matched," Vazquez said Friday. "They were really good. They had no holes in them."

About a dozen Marin churches and synagogues are housing and feeding a sizable number of Marin's homeless population, picking up the slack after county supervisors decided not to continue funding an emergency housing effort launched in December during a cold snap.

Those providing housing include Congregation Rodef Sholom, Vineyard Christian Fellowship of Marin, Lucas Valley Community Church and San Rafael First United Methodist Church. Chris Highland, the former Marin Interfaith street chaplain who is coordinating the effort, said some of the churches housing the homeless do not want to be identified because they're worried neighbors or city officials might object.

"These are congregations who are living their faith and acting compassionately," Highland said.

Churches and synagogues that aren't providing housing are providing food, clothing, bedding and other essentials. The homeless are picked up at the St. Vincent de Paul Society of Marin in San Rafael in the late afternoon and transported by bus to a different religious facility each night. There are

about 40 men and 20 women receiving care.

An unofficial count of Marin County's homeless population conducted on Jan. 29 found 635 homeless individuals in shelters, 1,147 unsheltered and 3,058 people precariously housed in danger of losing their shelter soon, said Larry Meredith, director of Marin County's Health and Human Services Department.

In December, county supervisors allocated \$52,500 to house homeless individuals through Feb. 15 who could not fit into any of the county's permanent shelters. Meredith utilized the Marin Center as a temporary shelter after local homeless advocates informed him that two homeless individuals had been treated at Marin General Hospital for exposure to the cold. Soon after, the emergency shelter was relocated to the San Rafael Armory, at 153 Madison Ave. in San Rafael.

Meredith said California's colossal budget deficit, and its impact on Marin County's revenue stream made it difficult to find the money to continue the emergency shelter program.

"We were seeking to address this during a time when it was very clear that we were in for massive reductions from the state," Meredith said. "The funding was not viewed in the same way as it might have been a year ago."

The Rev. Liza Klein of San Rafael First United Methodist Church said four or five members of her congregation have been volunteering each night, cooking or filling some other need. Klein cooked Thursday night, making barbecue chicken, vegetarian spaghetti and broccoli.

"I think it is really wonderful in many ways for congregations to get to interact with people directly and to really connect with the simple humanity of

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people who are homeless," Klein said.

Nevertheless, Klein said she is disappointed that it has fallen to the county's faith community to care for these homeless individuals. So far, the congregations have raised \$15,000 of the \$40,000 needed to continue the emergency shelter program through March 31.

"I do feel very, very strongly that the county should be paying at least the costs that are incurred by the churches to take care of the homeless," Klein said. "Something less than 5 percent of the population in Marin goes to church or synagogue. We're being asked to take responsibility for something that 100 percent of the people should be taking responsibility for."

Supervisor Susan Adams said the county of Marin is already providing hundreds of thousands dollars a year to Homeward Bound, the Novato-based nonprofit that operates shelters in Novato and San Rafael containing more than 120 beds.

"Unincorporated Marin only represents about 15 or 20 percent of the population," Adams said. "We have 11 cities and towns that also have homeless people. There has to be an engagement by cities and towns. There has to be a continuing engagement by the faith-based and nonprofit organizations and even the business community."

People interested in volunteering or donating to the homeless shelter program can get more information at [www.ershelter.wordpress.com](http://www.ershelter.wordpress.com)

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