

The Press Democrat

February 8, 2016

Petaluma's homeless efforts paying off

This editorial is from the Petaluma Argus-Courier:

It was not long ago that living on the streets of Petaluma was akin to a death sentence. From 2010 to 2014, there were 21 homeless people who died in the city, often in harsh conditions, sometimes due to drug abuse. In 2014 alone, eight bodies of homeless people were discovered.

In the past year, however, that trend has reversed. There were just two homeless deaths, and the entire homeless population declined in Petaluma in 2015. The turnaround is in part due to increased homeless outreach from the police department, but also because of the efforts of Petaluma nonprofits that provide service to the most vulnerable in the community. It's a positive trend that we hope continues into this year.

More than 60 percent of the city's homeless population was living in shelters as opposed to on the streets in 2015, a significant increase from the 21 percent sheltered in 2013. Overall, the homeless population in Petaluma also declined significantly, from 909 in 2013 to just 361 last year. Petaluma's share of Sonoma County's homeless population is now 11.6 percent, compared with 21.2 percent in 2013.

The homelessness problem is one that Petaluma police address each day. The police estimate that calls for service involving homeless people account for a whopping 50 percent of their daily workload.

In January, the Petaluma Police Department received a grant to create a new officer position focusing entirely on the city's homeless population. Once hired, the new officer will join another officer to form a two-person team centered on homelessness issues, which often include property crimes, violence, drug use, public health concerns and environmental impacts, and connecting homeless people to services and getting them off the streets.

The grant money will also support cleanup costs for encampments, including a payment program for homeless residents willing to do that work themselves.

Petaluma is lucky to have had an award-winning homeless service provider in the Committee on the Shelterless. Without their tireless efforts for nearly 30 years, homelessness in Petaluma could very well be endemic.

In June, as a result of sizable community donations, COTS was able to reopen its emergency family shelter, a lifeline for families with young children, who are some of the most at-risk among the homeless population.

A new program about to be launched by the Petaluma Health Care District, with support from St. Joseph Health and Kaiser Permanente, looks to solve some of the underlying issues that lead to chronic homelessness.

Called Petaluma Sober Circle, it will create a structured pathway toward addiction treatment and a mechanism for case management of homeless people across a number of service providers in Petaluma. Participating organizations include COTS, the Petaluma Police Department, the Sonoma County Department of Health Services and Petaluma People Services Center.

The new program is an example of the community coming together to help solve a chronic problem in the city. Homelessness continues to be a serious issue, but these initiatives will continue to yield positive changes for the benefit of the entire community.