
Sonoma County shelters decry loss in federal funding

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A change in federal funding for homeless charities coupled with how the state distributes the money has three Sonoma County nonprofits facing a \$1 million shortfall that could reduce their hours, staffing and number of programs.

Catholic Charities, Committee on the Shelterless (COTS) and InterFaith Shelter Network were bouyed this month by an \$800,000 check from the county board of supervisors for the upcoming fiscal year. That infusion stanchd the shortfall, but leaves the organizations unsure of future funding.

Between fiscal years 2015-16 and 2016-17, Sonoma County's portion of federal monies disbursed through California Emergency Solutions Grants dropped nearly 80 percent, from \$1.2 million to \$239,000.

The cut came from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development changing its focus away from transitional housing programs like those offered by the three Sonoma County nonprofits. Then California's Department of Housing and Community Development changed its awarding of the ESG money from a competitive basis to a per capita one within each of the state's 58 counties, regardless of programming.

"We were all kind of in shock because it seemed to be such an inequitable distribution," said Pamela Wallace, executive director of the InterFaith Shelter Network. "It just seems to really be an uninformed decision on their part."

Last year, her Santa Rosa-based organization received \$200,000. This year, the three organizations are expected to split a little more than that — \$239,000 — among

themselves. According to COTS' CEO Mike Johnson, the decline was the largest cut among California counties.

When Len Marabella, Catholic Charities' executive director, learned of the funding reduction, his thoughts immediately turned to what programming would have to end. Last year, the organization received \$600,000 in ESG money.

"We're still in the brainstorming stage" of planning for next year, he said. "It's applying for grants, and it's talking with the state government, too."

Johnson said the loss of funding would mean allowing people to stay only overnight instead of all day and cutting out the case management it provides to clients. If that happens, people like Jamie Sutton would be lost.

Sutton, 47, who attributes her successes and sobriety to COTS' programming, arrived in March 2014 from a residential treatment program. She has been clean of methamphetamine ever since, and is now in a sober-living apartment in Petaluma. She has a job. She has reconnected with her family. And even though she isn't staying at COTS anymore, she still returns to volunteer.

"This is very much a family and the people that work here take a genuine interest in wanting us to succeed and wanting us to do well, and they revel in your success," Sutton said.

"My addiction and the fallout from that had totally dismantled my entire life," she said.

That's when she found COTS. During her 4½ months there, staff made sure she paid attention to her court requirements, ate, had a place to stay and attended her mandated Alcoholics Anonymous or Narcotics Anonymous meetings. COTS helped her get a bus pass.

"To an entire community — to an entire subculture of people — this is the only thing between them and death," she said. "This place keeps people alive."

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