



COUNTY OF SANTA CRUZ

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CARLOS J. PALACIOS, COUNTY ADMINISTRATIVE OFFICER

PRESS RELEASE

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COVID-19 HOMELESSNESS TASK FORCE ESTABLISHED

Priority tasks include protecting health and supplementing services

The County of Santa Cruz and partner cities have established a task force to oversee homeless services during the COVID-19 pandemic, focused on minimizing the spread of the disease by isolating sick and vulnerable individuals and supplementing existing services impacted by the outbreak.

Led by the Santa Cruz County Department of Human Services, the task force consists of staff from the County and cities of Santa Cruz and Watsonville, as well as community-based organizations' experts brought in to help secure facilities to shelter both sick and well individuals experiencing homelessness, as well as a range of services needed to support the operation of those facilities.

"We now have more than a dozen staff working together to address this very important community need," said Elissa Benson, Assistant County Administrative Officer for Santa Cruz County. "Care for people experiencing homelessness is a vital element of our overall plan to limit the spread of COVID-19 in the Santa Cruz County community."

"The City of Santa Cruz stands in partnership with the County and regional homeless service agencies to provide for the best possible support for our unsheltered community," said Susie O'Hara, Assistant to the City Manager for the City of Santa Cruz and task force member. "We have been working double time to meet all of the objectives set forth by the County and offer new sites for programming as those needs are identified."

"In our collective efforts to slow down the spread of this dangerous disease, it is especially important that we provide services to the most vulnerable in our community," said Matt Huffaker Watsonville City Manager. "This collaborative effort will ensure that homeless individuals will be connected with safe shelter and services to ensure their health and the health of the community at large."



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The Human Services Departmental Operations Center is tasked with implementing and overseeing all facets of the local pandemic response within the homelessness community. It has already reached a lease agreement on a private hotel/motel facility, and is ready to scale up with additional lease agreements if and when the need arises. For medical reasons, the County is not pursuing hotel vouchers to house symptomatic patients in publicly available hotel facilities.

Hotel/motel capacity will be prioritized to house COVID-19-positive homeless patients who are recuperating, homeless individuals with significant COVID-19 exposure in need of quarantine, and medically vulnerable and elderly homeless individuals. These facilities are one pillar of the task force's four-pillar plan, which also includes expanded sheltering capacity, expanded hygiene infrastructure and direct outreach to homeless individuals.

The task force has requested 5,600 MREs (meals ready-to-eat) from the State for distribution to people experiencing homelessness. In addition, the City of Santa Cruz has completed steps to provide resources to people experiencing homelessness, including hiring a Homelessness Manager and coordinating temporary food distribution with Santa Cruz City Schools to provide 75 meals daily to local persons experiencing homelessness.

The County and partner cities, including Santa Cruz and Watsonville, are nearing completion of a plan to expand overall sheltering capacity to replace capacity diminished by the Santa Cruz County Health Officer's Shelter in Place order, which limits the number of beds available in existing shelters due to distancing requirements. An announcement on the locations and operations of those sites is expected within days.

The City of Santa Cruz has also worked with the Salvation Army and hired Downtown Streets Team members to bring on additional site monitors to facilitate ongoing safe and client-focused operations at the Armory. Resources at the Housing Matters campus on Coral Street are being reconfigured to accommodate more shelter capacity and resource centers for increased health assessments, and County outreach workers, including Homeless Persons Health Project Staff, have received training on symptoms and care of individuals with COVID-19.

In partnership with Santa Cruz City Schools (SCCS) and facilitated by the County, Santa Cruz City staff will begin distributing bagged meals to persons experiencing homelessness this week. Meals will be distributed across local homeless services and into encampments to ensure those who typically receive food in congregate settings are meeting social distancing protocols.