

## LOCAL NEWS

# Marin's homeless face tough challenges in housing quest

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Gary Lavarack, 79, never expected to become homeless. Yet as the pandemic began, he found himself sleeping in a van in Sausalito.

Lavarack, a resident of the city since 1998, had a long career in the film and entertainment industry. When surgeries left him unable to work, he retired — and discovered his Social Security benefits were not enough to cover the cost of housing and basic needs.

He began living out of his vehicle, and stayed there for more than 20 months.

“You can’t work anymore. People just don’t hire somebody that’s my age,” he said.

It took nearly two years, but Lavarack became one of the hundreds of homeless people who have secured permanent housing in Marin.

Over the past four years, the county, the Marin Housing Authority and local service providers have collaborated to find permanent housing for 404 of the most vulnerable, long-term chronically homeless people in Marin. Of those, 95% are still housed.

However, the need for more permanent shelter persists as the county grapples with an array of challenges, including a chronic housing shortage. Impacted communities



Marin skipped its “continuum of care point-in-time count” of homeless people during the pandemic. Although a substitute count of people living in vehicles was performed in January, the next count won’t take place until January or later.

As of 2019, [the survey reported](#) 1,034 known homeless people — 73% of whom had a prior residence in Marin and 55% who have been homeless for at least one year.

“We know there’s been a huge increase in need,” since 2020, based on anecdotal evidence from health care providers and the vehicle count, said Carrie Sager, a county homelessness official.

As of Nov. 2, reports showed 33 residents at the Kerner Boulevard and Mill Street centers in San Rafael; 47 at the New Beginnings Center in Novato; six at the Voyager Carmel Center in San Rafael; five at the Bridge center in San Rafael; and 22 at the Family Center in San Rafael. Another four people have been housed through the Transition to Wellness program and 29 through the Project Roomkey program.

To meet this increased need, providers have relied on a so-called “no wrong door approach” to get people into the system in any way possible.

Sager said that as of Oct. 18, the county had tracked 16 homeless residents who found a home in August. Another 11 were placed in housing in September, “which is double our usual rate,” she said.

Since the coordinated entry system launched in October 2017, the county has a 93.55% housing retention rate, where the national benchmark for a successful permanent supportive housing program is a 85% rate, Sager said.

Sager said the biggest improvement has been the increase in resources, such as local emergency vouchers and rapid rehousing money.

“I think our new outreach programs have been a huge boon,” she said. “Marin has always been a little short on outreach ... for such a geographically large county.”

In San Rafael — which had 225 homeless residents in 2019 — six of eight who received vouchers have been housed since the supported site under Highway 101 opened in June, said Lynn Murphy, a homelessness specialist at the San Rafael Police Department. She said 25 others are in case management. The site is full at 43, with 16 on a waiting list. Three other people were sent to the Kerner Boulevard shelter.



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Sausalito, which is under a federal court order to provide a site for homeless

Mayor Jill Hoffman said there are 20 cots available every night at the MLK gym through the Red Cross, along with seven beds for Marinship residents at the New Beginnings Center in Novato. She said homeless people are not using the sites and that no Marinship residents have been placed in housing.

Novato — which had 310 homeless residents in 2019 — was [ordered during another lawsuit](#) to create the same type of site at Lee Gerner Park in November and begin housing people. The park has 17 spaces, only for those who have been sheltering there, Mayor Pat Eklund said last month.

Sager said availability of housing is a major issue, “especially for people who are chronically homeless.”

“Even with a voucher that guarantees payment every month, many landlords require rental history and good credit, which is a barrier for many people,” Sager said. She said there is not enough staffing to provide enough permanent supportive housing help.

“It means that assigning housing feels a little bit like assigning life boats on the Titanic — there’s so much need, but we just don’t have the resources, especially when big-city set-asides in state funding mean we get half the state money per person as a larger county like San Francisco or Alameda,” she said.

The county is seeking eligible sites under Project Homekey, a program that offers state funds to convert buildings into housing. Sites have been approved in Corte Madera and San Rafael, but rejected in Novato after local pushback. An application is underway for funds to convert a former skilled nursing center into housing in Larkspur.

Another problem is the shortage of sites for people who cannot live independently, even with in-home support workers, Sager said.

“Our homeless population, like our general population, is aging and many people need a higher level of care,” Sager said.

She added skilled nursing centers are in short supply, costly and “sometimes refuse people with comorbidities, like many of the people we work with.”

“It’s a huge system gap and one we’re afraid is going to keep getting worse,” she said.

Marv Kav Sweeney, the executive director of Homeward Bound of Marin, said the



The San Rafael-based St. Vincent de Paul Society of Marin assesses candidates, enrolls them in the coordinated entry program and provides a case manager to navigate options for housing and assistance.

Christine Paquette, the organization's executive director, said the level of aid for homeless residents is based on how they score on a "vulnerability" index. A high score for factors of chronic homelessness, including illness and age, can earn an emergency voucher, while those who score lower and have some resources can qualify for rapid rehousing.

Paquette said some who come to St. Vincent "with a string of bad luck," and lost a job or home but are able to earn income, need support "but not necessarily a voucher." She has about 25 clients per week who fit the less acute, "situational" category of homelessness.

In the last year, at least 40 of them have found housing, and another 40 are in the midst of housing efforts.

St. Vincent also helps people with moderate to severe mental health issues who might be directed to the Marin County Department of Health and Human Services.

Mental health can be better treated for those in housing, Paquette said. The organization tries to place people in a community such as an apartment complex to feel connected and have "their own couch and their own bed, their own place to be."

Paquette called the difference for people who get access to a shower and restroom in their own sleeping space "night and day."

"They can sleep without worry of being moved or assaulted," she said. "If you're not sleeping at night and you're worried about your physical safety, just those things alone will have a terrible effect on your mental health."

Although housing options are few, those who have received assistance from St. Vincent to enter the county's system say they have hope they will eventually find housing.

Lavarack struggled living alone in his vehicle, and was hesitant to seek help while nonprofit groups shut down at the beginning of the pandemic, until he was directed to St. Vincent.



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"When a new allotment of Section 8 vouchers became available, we knew Garv

Blake Krueger, who is staying at Homeward Bound's shelter in San Rafael, has been waiting for months for a housing voucher.

Krueger, 30, became homeless at the beginning of the pandemic, when he lost his job in the health care industry because of budget cuts. Since then, he's had no luck finding another job.

"It's crazy how much the market is and how much housing really is," Krueger said. "Even if you have a job ... just for me, working the full-time job that I had, I probably would have to take on another part-time job to actually be comfortable."

Liddle said Krueger is on the path toward an emergency housing voucher. Once he gets all documentation to the Marin Housing Authority, he should be awarded a voucher and can seek an apartment, with help from a case manager and emergency funds.

Krueger said waiting for housing changed how he views homelessness.

"Being an everyday person ... being on the outside looking in, you sort of think, I'll never be that person, I'll never be in that situation," he said.

"I think it's all about how you finish at the end, not what you go through," he said. "I just feel like you have to be hungry, and you have to want to be where you were right before this speed bump."

Suri Hauge-Oru, 67, earned an emergency housing voucher because of her age and situation.

Before she lost her live-in job in West Marin at the start of the pandemic, she had worked as a caregiver for decades. Unable to find other employment or housing, she lived in her van in Point Reyes Station for more than a year, using Social Security benefits of less than \$1,000 per month.

"Given her age and lack of ability to increase her income, she was awarded a Section 8 voucher and is currently in the process of finalizing the voucher so she can begin looking for housing," Liddle said.

Once referred to the St. Vincent organization, Hauge-Oru said, the process moved smoothly for her. However, she said "it really is a conundrum for people who are homeless, because wait lists often mean you ... have to keep current with them every three to six months."



"I think it keeps me with the imagination that I will find a cottage ... even an apartment," she said.

The experience of extended homelessness has left her feeling "marginalized."

"Sometimes I feel really well supported, but about once a month I feel like I'm invisible, and I'd better stay that way," she said.

Yet people who offered help, such as charging her phone or feeding and walking her dogs, kept her going, she said.

"I have a lot of gratitude for the small pieces of generosity," she said.

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**Natalie Hanson**



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