

# Berkeley Daily Planet

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## Newest Shelter Helps The Young Homeless

By JAKOB SCHILLER

“The first time you sleep on the streets you become obnoxiously ill within two weeks. It happens to everyone,” said Marz, one of the many young transients who consistently line Telegraph Avenue.

Marz, who has been on the Berkeley streets for six months, had his sick spell and says he’s now developed immunities. Nonetheless, he says, it’s become increasingly difficult to survive as the temperature drops and the rain starts.

It might not sound like much, but this year Marz has an escape—at least for part of the year—at a new shelter called YEAH!, which stands for Youth Emergency Assistance Hostel. Now in it’s second year, YEAH! is a new shelter established specifically to house people ages 18–25 who need overnight shelter during the winter months.

Funded in part by the City of Berkeley and staffed by a crew of over 75 volunteers, the shelter opens Dec. 1 at the Lutheran Church of the Cross, 1744 University Ave. Services include overnight shelter from 8 p.m. to 8 a.m., along with snacks, breakfast, and physical and mental health programs. There are two separate facilities, one for single women and children, the other co-ed.

YEAH! Executive Director Sharon Hawkins Leyden, a Licensed Clinical Social Worker, says the shelter fills a need for many of Berkeley’s homeless youth who have refused to stay at other shelters around the area, which they say are overrun by other groups.

“[The other shelters] are usually a little too rowdy and smelly and insane,” said Marz. “They’re just a little nuts.”

Youths complain that the other shelters are often filled with the mentally disabled and the drugged-out.

“Around here, a lot of times the older homeless people, not to stereotype them, are on some very hard-core drugs,” said Sean,

who has been on the streets of Berkeley for seven months. “It’s hard to deal with them.”

YEAH! also provides another perk certain to attract younger people in need. The shelter will allow animals, usually forbidden at the other shelters.

“We know that the youth are really attached to their animals,” said Leyden. “We didn’t want them to be a barrier.”

Leyden said last year’s shelter was so successful that they were able to re-open this year with even more support, though with an estimated budget of \$60,000 they’re still short \$25,000. If they get all their funding, she said, they’ll be open seven days a week through March.

In the meantime, thanks to a number of large grants, including a \$15,000 contribution from the City of Berkeley, they’ll operate at full scale until more money comes in—at least through most of the coldest months. Operating at full capacity, each bed costs \$13 a night, much less than other emergency programs.

Last year’s program prompted the Berkeley chief of police to write a letter thanking the shelter for their help in eliminating one of the city’s largest and most residual problems. And several Telegraph Avenue vendors told Leyden they’d noticed a decline in the numbers of transients on the street.

Leyden says the center also functions as an intermediary to help their clients get back on their feet during one of the hardest parts of the year. Because they don’t have to worry about finding shelter each night, they can spend their days looking for jobs and other programs to help them find more permanent housing—and for young homeless parents to send their children to school.

Marz says he’ll head to the shelter once it opens. In the meantime, he says, he’s been sleeping behind buildings and doing his best to stay healthy.

Joining him at YEAH! may be Jen and Jose, who have been sleeping in their car. Both say they’ve caught pneumonia sleeping on the streets and welcomed a chance to stay at the shelter, especially because they can bring their pooch.

Jane Micallef, a Community Services Specialist with the City of Berkeley, said there will be other emergency options for those who can't stay at YEAH!

Options include the shelter at the old Army Base in West Oakland, which has 50 beds reserved for people from Berkeley. Micallef said the city pays for BART tickets to the West Oakland station and provides a shuttle from there to the shelter. Open since Nov. 10, the facility provides both a general occupancy area and a reserved area for families or people with disabilities. The facility is co-sponsored by the City of Berkeley, City of Oakland and Alameda County.

The city also provides a motel voucher program for families in need. Budgeted at \$45,000, the program provides between five and six families with a room every night at a cost of about \$60 per room.

Micallef says the additional programs are useful for emergency use, but are only a partial fix for the city's long-running homelessness problem.

Other programs, including the Berkeley Food and Housing Project, continue to run year-round food and housing projects and conduct emergency services, such as coat and blanket drives.

People interested in volunteering or making tax deductible donations to YEAH! Can contact Sharon Hawkins Leyden at 848-1424. For more information on other emergency and existing shelters services, contact Jane Micallef with the City of Berkeley.