

Working poor finding homes on four wheels in Mountain View

It's a new phenomenon, say city officials and social workers

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Recreational vehicles and other trucks and cars are lined up the entire length of Crisanto Avenue along Rengstorff Park in Mountain View, on Tuesday evening, July 11, 2017. RVs have become an increasing choice for the working poor in the Santa Clara Valley as rents and mortgages have skyrocketed over the past few years. (John Orr / Daily News)

The new face of homelessness in Mountain View can often be found behind the wheel of a recreational vehicle parked around the city.

“It’s a completely new situation for us,” said the city’s communications coordinator, Shonda Ranson. “Housing has been a problem for a while, but the working poor living in RVs is new.

“Some are doing it by choice for refusing to pay the high rents, or they can’t afford it. But they are working poor. These are people who get up in the morning and go to one, two, three jobs to try to make ends meet.”

The city of Mountain View, said Ranson, is working to be “a nexus to connect people who need services with the people who have the services.”

That nexus is overseen by Kimberly S. Thomas, assistant to the city manager.

“We are testing and retesting programs to see what works,” said Ranson.

Mountain View is doing very well with its efforts, according to Tom Myers, executive director of the Community Services Agency of Mountain View, Los Altos and Los Altos Hills.

The CSA was formed in the late 1950s, and by 1967 was serving seasonal farm workers, then evolved into being a community safety net, according to Myers.

The nonprofit organization, with a yearly budget of \$4 million, a staff of 30 and about 700 volunteers, serves from 4,500 to 7,000 clients a year, providing assistance in finding housing, food and supplies to people in need.

On an average day, said Myers, about a ton of food goes through the CSA warehouse and out to people who need it. During the holidays, that amount might increase to 14 or 15 tons a day.

About 10 percent of the CSA’s clients are homeless people, Myers said. The rest are people who might have stable housing, but need help with paying the rent or feeding their families.

“We have food, housing assistance, moving assistance, a wide variety of services, specialized service for seniors. Basically, we’re all about making sure they have access to food and shelter.”

CSA volunteers work in the food center, deliver food, drive seniors to medical appointments. This summer, said Myers, they will hand out backpacks for students who are heading back to school. And some go down to the creek beds, where more of the homeless live than in the RVs.

“It’s difficult to know how many there are,” said Myers. “Our clients at CSA ... The last time they counted, as of about eight months ago, we had about 391 homeless clients, with about 89 living in vehicles. And some of them are couch-surfing.”

“We have been serving homeless people throughout our history,” Myers said, “but the number of homeless has grown astronomically, exponentially — whatever modifier you might want to use.”

According to the Santa Clara County Homeless Census and Survey, the number of homeless living in Mountain View has increased 51 percent from 2015 to 2017. According to that census, there were 276 homeless in 2015, and 416 in 2017.

“The whole idea of people living in vehicles ... we’ve never seen that to the degree we see now. It’s a relatively new phenomenon for us and for the community.”

The CSA has developed a specialized outreach plan for the residents of vehicles, including people who do what they can to let the RV dwellers know their services exist, and people who try to find affordable housing. There are several multilingual staff members.

“Our goal is to find stable housing for people,” Myers said.

“There are affordable housing units in Mountain View, but they are very difficult to come by, very much in demand. That’s true in the entire region. We have an affordable housing crisis on our hands.”

SANTA CLARA COUNTY HOMELESS COUNT

The south Santa Clara County cities of Morgan Hill and Gilroy saw big jumps in the number of homeless tallied on their streets this year, with many now living in RVs parked on streets.

Here are totals for cities with more than 50 homeless people counted, as well as for unincorporated areas:

Cities	2015	2017	Percent change
Morgan Hill	81	388	379%
Campbell	53	94	77
Cupertino	73	127	74
Gilroy	439	722	64
Mountain View	276	416	51
Palo Alto	219	276	26
San Jose	4,063	4,350	7
Los Gatos*	1	52	—
Sunnyvale	288	253	-12
Santa Clara	377	272	-28
Milpitas	122	66	-46
Unincorporated areas	500	302	-40
County total	6,556	7,394	13%

*Percent increase not calculated.

Source: Santa Clara County Homeless Census and Survey, 2015 and 2017

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