

Self Help Center funding slashed

Housing Clinic, HOPE, others among Health Dept. casualties

BY KAREN OBERDORFER

DARNELL BYRD chooses to locate his offices in the hub of the city, where he can manage many of his business needs from one spot. Five days a week, from 7 a.m. to 7 p.m., you can usually find him at the Tenderloin Self Help Center on Turk Street.

"This is the only shelter I know right now that is open five days a week and I have a place to come, to just stay out of the cold or the rain," said Byrd, currently homeless.

If it weren't for the center, he said, he would have to panhandle.

But come July 1, when the new fiscal year arrives, the Tenderloin Self Help Center, a drop-in service for homeless men and women in the central city, will be closed, said Executive Director Jackie Jenks.

Central City Hospitality House, which operates the Self Help Center, this fiscal year has a \$1.3 million budget, \$567,618 from the S.F. Department of Public Health. The Health Commission has sent the mayor its 2003-04 budget, which omits Hospitality House funding.

Every city department is feeling the crunch with the mayor's budget instructions to cut general fund dependency by 6% for fiscal year 2003-04, which for the Department of Public Health translates into \$18 million. In addition, \$20 million will be sucked out of the DPH budget to cover "unavoidable increases" in normal operating costs, such as \$288,000 for a state-mandated computerized provider order system. The budget also projects a \$2.5 million decrease in available grant money.

Hospitality House falls into a widening DPH category called a referral service, which is being placed in front of the numbers-crunching firing squad. In budget-speak the rationale is, "without treatment capacity, referrals for clients would not be warranted as there would be insufficient service capacity to serve them," the DPH budget document says.

Losses in other referral programs will affect the central city. Tenderloin Housing Clinic faces cuts of \$59,310, which, said Sam Dodge, program director of THC's SRO Collaborative, will translate to reduced staffing and services.

Homeless Outreach Prevention Effort (HOPE), a three-person team that checks up on and connects services to hard-to-reach homeless who are diagnosed with multiple

problems, will consolidate with MOST (Mental Health Care Management and Mental Health Services), saving DPH \$244,884.

SRO Families Collaborative, a project that serves families in SROs through Chinatown Community Development Corp., will lose \$50,000. The AIDS Hotline, \$138,000.

"The issue before you is not whether the proposed cuts are harmful to health — they are — but whether the proposed cuts are the least harmful cuts possible to reach our fiscal targets," wrote DPH Director Mitchell Katz in his proposed budget. He presented it to the Health Commission at a February budget hearing held in City Hall to accommodate the overflow crowd that came to speak on behalf of programs in jeopardy.

But many people not only defended their programs, they also decried the need for DPH to cut at all, claiming that the department should be spared the surgery because it serves the city's most vulnerable populations.

The city's deficit is a "moving target," said Supervisor Chris Daly, chair of the Budget Committee. As of the Feb. 20 Budget Committee meeting, the city deficit had been whittled from a whopping \$340 million to \$314 million. But by the beginning of the next fiscal year, "that gap has to be zero," Daly said.

This month, DPH submits its budget proposal to the mayor's office, and after that concerned citizens can go to the Budget Committee meetings to have their say. Daly plans to devote the first half hour of each meeting to public comment. He also said the Budget Committee will hold five evening meetings out in the supervisorial districts.

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Jackie Jenks
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

SERVES 200-300 CLIENTS A DAY

While DPH will save over \$550,000 with its cut to Hospitality House, the city will lose a 12-hour, five-day-a-week multiservice drop-in center that serves 8,500 to 10,000 clients a year. About 200-300 homeless and indigent folks visit the center each day, Jenks said.

The Tenderloin Self Help Center has been in the neighborhood since 1986. The main room is lined with couches and chairs, and there is a kitchen area and rest room. The center also offers intangibles such as a sense of community, said Karen Washington, a transgender volunteer who



PHOTOS BY LENNY LIMJOCO

organizes activities such as outings to the park or performances for Black History Month. She also assists with peer counseling for other transgenders. Distinct peer support groups target populations such as transgenders, homeless people and drug addicts. Life skills are shored up in these groups, such as substance abusers learning a harm reduction perspective and how to avoid the common pitfalls that lead to eviction once housing is found. Another workshop theme is finding that housing.

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HUB OF HOSPITALITY HOUSE

Phones and a clothing box are also some of the amenities of the place, as well as the referrals to shelters and help applying for housing and jobs.

"Losing the drop-in center is like ripping the heart out of Hospitality House," said Jenks, "it's the hub of where people go." The drop-in center, she said, is the main access point for Hospitality House's other three main programs: employment services, shelter case management, and a community arts program.

Charles, a center volunteer who vacuums, makes coffee, calms rabble-rousers, and performs other chores, asked: "If they close July 1 where will these people go?"

Luther Richert, Hospitality House staff member, had an unpalatable answer: "Without our services, the people who come to the Tenderloin drop-in center will be getting their needs met in jails, emergency rooms and hospitals, at an astronomical cost to the city." On the other hand, the average cost of a visit at the center is about \$11, he said, and besides referrals, it offers clients counseling groups, phones, bathrooms, emergency toiletry kits, weekly groceries for seniors and the needy.

Byrd holds up a letter from the Bayaniham SRO hotel — he's scheduled for an entrance interview, which he got through the Self Help Center.

"The drop-in center's a place that functions where I can find out stuff for housing, for clothes vouchers, for a whole lot of necessary things that I might need, bus tokens to get somewhere, unemployment services..." But he also repeats again and again, it's a place to get in out of the cold, and rest. ■



Self Help client uses one of the center's computers available to the homeless.

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