

# Daly to the rescue – again

## Self-help center gets supervisors' backing for 6 months more

BY TOM CARTER

**S**UPERVISOR Chris Daly and his posse rode into City Hall this month to rescue the Tenderloin's oldest and most noted drop-in center, the one designed specifically for down-and-outers who don't cotton to rules and snooty folks.

When the dust had cleared, the Tenderloin Self-Help Center at 290 Turk was back on its feet, its funding restored—at least for six more months of happy trails.

"Chris Daly has saved the center four or five times," said Jackie Jenks, executive director of Central City Hospitality House, which oversees the center.

This time was a close shave. In less than a month the city-funded self-help center would have shut down after 19 years as an oasis for street people who often shun the system that would help them. Departmental budget cuts, responding to the \$97 million deficit the city faces in the next 18 months, again were the villain. The center planned its farewell party for Dec. 31.

But Daly got Supervisor Tom Ammiano to put the issue on the Dec. 8 agenda of the Finance and Audit Committee, which Ammiano chairs. After a major display of sentiment and support from a crowd of 60, the committee decided the mayor could dip into a \$25 million general fund reserve for \$283,809. The sum would go into the Department of Public Health budget so the

center that it finances would last through June 2005. On a 3-0 vote, the committee sent that proposal to the Board of Supervisors.

The supes fiddled with it some on Dec. 14. Daly said Dr. Mitch Katz, DPH director, had assured him that, in view of the restoration effort, the center's contract would be extended. But the expenditure was changed to go to the Department of Human Services budget before the measure was passed 7-4. That would mean DHS' Trent Rhorer would hold the strings, not Katz. And just weeks before, that department had cut from its budget a new drop-in program at the Tenderloin AIDS Resource Center on Golden Gate Avenue that was to supplant the center.

There is still a patch of road for the ordinance to travel. It will have a second reading before the supes on Jan. 4. If it passes again, it will go to the mayor who will have 10 days to sign it or veto it. (A veto override takes eight votes.) Or he could return it unassigned, which would allow it to be enacted without his blessing.

The self-help center has its special niche in the safety net for homeless men and women. Its pivotal descriptions are "high accessibility," "low threshold," "peer-based" and, of course, "self help." Each year since 1985 the model has continued to attract disheartened, distrustful and sometimes disoriented street people to get them the counseling and help they needed, but only when they said they wanted it. No pushiness, just hanging out. No strings either.

What is available off the street is a roof to duck under for coffee, showers, toilets, socializing, food, maybe a movie. When someone does take a step toward help and signs in, giving the last four digits of their Social Security number and the first initial of their last name, a larger world opens: crisis, harm-reduction and basic counseling, support groups of peers, and employment services. Three-fourths of the staff are former homeless themselves.

The center sees 200-300 people a day, some repeating, and 6,000 unduplicated a year, according to Jenks. It is a successful model with the earmarks of community and the pride that goes with it. About 30 of them brought their energy

to a press conference at City Hall that preceded the Dec. 8 committee hearing.

Rain forced the gathering indoors to the South Court where people assembled at the east end of the high-ceilinged, palatial room. The center's supporters stood on one side of the microphone. On the other side, 10 feet away, were a half-dozen others, two with notepads, one with a Channel 26 TV camera, who listened to 10 minutes of chants—"Self-Help Center is under attack, whaddya do? Act up, fight back."—before Jenks led off the series of speakers praising the center's effectiveness and vital role in the Tenderloin. And the Rev. Glenda Hope, whose San Francisco Network Ministries helped found the center, said it "offered a connection in a way that's almost impossible elsewhere."

Ammiano showed up and said, "If it ain't broke, don't fix it" and "We shouldn't be messing with this program."

Daly showed up, too. And after the applause died, he stepped forward and talked about how the center was "ingrained in the history and morality of the city."

So whatever the committee was going to do upstairs, right there were two of the three votes to do it.

Upstairs, there were too many people to fit into Room 250. Three dozen milling about the marble floor were directed by a sheriff's deputy to Room 263 where they could watch the proceedings on a monitor and listen for their names to be called to go to 250 and make a statement.

More than 50 went to the microphone that day. They were people of position and no position, the well-off and the poor, administrators and volunteers, those with long experience working with the homeless and the homeless themselves. As the committee — Ammiano, Daly and Supervisor Aaron Peskin — listened attentively, they talked about how the center had turned their lives around, the family that it had become, the vision it had, the absence of obstacles, the nonjudgmental acceptance and respect there, and the refuge it is. One woman walked up in tears, could hardly speak, and returned to her seat crying.

And they talked about the cold technical complexities of its closing.

The center's \$567,801 annual funding had been dropped out of the DPH budget. A request for proposals for a nearly identical program had been sent out by DHS, which oversees Care Not Cash. Winning that contract with its program outline for 18 months of funding was TARC on Golden Gate Avenue, which has a drop-in center, too. It was to expand.

The move seemed to seal the self-help center's doom. But then the mayor's budget cuts eliminated the TARC contract, too, leaving the Tenderloin with a gaping hole in January 2005.

Now, with the supes' action, the self-help center is back on the map — at least temporarily — having lost just one more of its nine lives. And TARC's ambitious plan for a drop-in center that met DHS' needs is left out in the cold. ■



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