

Mayor's Tenderloin Health cut puts pressure on homeless resources

BY HEIDI SWILLINGER

MAYOR Newsom has put the squeeze on the neighborhood's main providers by cutting nearly \$400,000 from Tenderloin Health's drop-in center, which operated 7 a.m. to 11:30 p.m. seven days a week. The center is a place where homeless can make shelter reservations, use the bathroom, have a snack, socialize and get health care. The cut, which took effect last month, caused the center to scale back its hours. It now opens at 1 p.m., forcing the homeless to go elsewhere for help during the mornings. Also, it's now closed on Saturdays.

For Terry, who declined to give his last name, the reduced hours mean more competition for increasingly scarce shelter beds.

"People have to run around trying to find another place to get (shelter) reservations," he said. "It's going to create a lot of chaos. Now (the homeless) will just hang out on the streets and get caught up in the riff-raff."

Newsom's move has angered those who work with the homeless, particularly since the Board of Supervisors OK'd full funding for the drop-in center during marathon budget sessions in June. Newsom signed the budget in July, but announced he would trim \$4.8 million to preserve the city's emergency funds. In August, he red-lined Tenderloin Health's funding while the supes were on a three-week break.

"While the board was on recess, he did a number of cuts, and (Tenderloin Health's) was one of them," said Lena Gomes, legislative aide to District 6 Supervisor Chris Daly, who was unavailable for comment.

Jennifer Friedenbach, executive director of the Coalition on Homelessness, was irate.

"The mayor's decision was unilateral, without community input," she said.

Darius Kayhan, the mayor's Homeless Policy director, said Newsom made the cut because Tenderloin Health services duplicate other nearby centers', including 150 Otis St., MSC South in SoMa and Hospitality

House in the Tenderloin. "We feel they can absorb folks currently accessing Tenderloin Health," he said.

But the homeless and service providers disagree. After TL Health's hours were reduced Oct. 18, 150 Otis, Hospitality House and Glide Memorial United Methodist Church reported shelter reservation demand surged and drop-in respite went unmet in some cases.

Glide is now the Tenderloin's sole source for homeless residents seeking morning shelter reservations. Glide opens for reservations at 7 a.m. — the same time Tenderloin Health used to open. Previously, 10 people typically lined up to make shelter reservations when the doors opened, said Kim Armbruster, who manages the church's walk-in center. Oct. 23, a few days after Tenderloin Health was cut, 30 people stood patiently in the predawn dark, waiting for the doors to open.

"The first person got here at 2 a.m.; the second and third lined up at 3:30," said Armbruster.

Armbruster said it's not unusual for shelter beds to be fully booked by 7:30 a.m., which means he and his staff have to turn away people who may have been waiting in line for hours. On Oct. 23, for example, by 7:09 a.m., there were no more shelter beds for women. For men, by 7:02 only one bed was available at MSC South; the rest of the shelter system's open beds were miles away in the Bayview, said Armbruster.

Jackie Jenks, executive director of Central City Hospitality House, which opens at 11 a.m., said her program is not equipped to absorb the Tenderloin Health clients. She said her agency is geared primarily for clients who are housed but need case management or mental health or employment services, while Tenderloin Health's drop-in center is specifically set up for homeless clients.

"Hospitality House can't fill that void," she said, adding that a recent capacity survey showed that her agency is already stretched to the limits. "We were over capac-

ity for what we feel is safe and healthy." She said the Tenderloin Health cuts have resulted in a surge in clients. "We're more crowded than we normally would be in the morning."

Like Armbruster, Jenks noted that clients are reporting increasing difficulty in reserving shelter beds in the neighborhood during the morning — a problem that predates but is exacerbated by the Tenderloin Health cuts.

Jenks said she's particularly concerned that Tenderloin Health is now shuttered on Saturdays, when other neighborhood organizations are also closed. That leaves homeless residents with nowhere to go for respite from the streets in the Tenderloin.

Evidently, at least some of them were willing to leave the neighborhood on Oct. 18, the first Saturday Tenderloin Health closed. "When I came in on the midnight shift, there were more people than usual," said Lavis Thompson, a shelter worker at 150 Otis. The center's 40 chairs for respite were filled and 15 were people lined up, said Thompson. "No one mentioned Tenderloin Health specifically, but for some strange reason, there were more people than normal."

Reginald Dillard Sr., a Tenderloin Health regular, was one of them. "Weekends in San Francisco are mean — mean for food, mean for services," he said. "There's nothing to do except go to a movie or restaurant," providing, he added, that one has the means.

"It just gives people less refuge," said Tenderloin Health client Michael Varn, who noted that the center used to sponsor a Saturday drop-in group where people could gather to talk and let off steam. "There's going to be a lot more meandering people," he said. "It's a lot easier to make a bad decision if you have nowhere to go and no one to talk to." ■

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Jackie Jenks
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

12 Tenderloin buildings – 1,000 units – get free wi-fi

BY MARJORIE BEGGS

EVER wonder what happens to pilot projects? Here's one that's starting to fly: free wi-fi in the Tenderloin.

A year ago, TNDC's 177-room Dalt Hotel was the test site for a Google-funded pilot. The SRO was fitted with a DSL line, small broadcast wireless units called repeaters, made by Meraki Inc., and mini wall plugs. The repeaters are good up to 500 feet and, placed throughout the building, give anyone with a computer access to the Internet. Several dozen residents of the Dalt and nearby Alexander Residence and West Hotel — near enough to pick up the signal — began using the free wi-fi.

The pilot was a one-time gig for Google, a Meraki investor. At the time of the Dalt project, Google was negotiating with the city and Earthlink to provide free wi-fi citywide. In August 2007, Earthlink pulled out and that deal collapsed.

PICKED UP WHERE EARTHLINK LEFT OFF

Meraki, a SoMa up-and-comer, stepped in and is picking up the tab for a much wider Tenderloin network. CEO Sanjit Biswas announced Sept. 16 that his company would extend free Internet service to eight TNDC SROs and four Housing Authority buildings.

A week later, 12 volunteers from the nonprofit SFConnect began installing Meraki radios atop TNDC's Alexander Residence, Antonia Manor, Curran House, Franciscan Towers, Plaza Apartments, Ramona Apartments and West Hotel, and on Housing

Authority apartment buildings at 350 and 666 Ellis St., and 939 and 951 Eddy.

All the buildings also have been wired with repeaters, according to Mike McCarthy, the city Department of Technology's community broadband manager.

NO COST TO TENANTS

The rooftop radio antennas give Internet access through all windows in their sightline, even in buildings not part of the Meraki project. The repeaters installed on every floor of the 12 buildings help spread the access to rooms and apartments without sightlines. About 1,000 low-income housing units are now good to go, with no cost to tenants, TNDC or the Housing Authority.

"This project was pretty similar to the pilot at the Dalt, only much bigger," said McCarthy. "Meraki used TNDC and Housing Authority buildings as its anchor for its project called Free the Net, and now it's working on getting the network throughout the Tenderloin."

The network could expand how community activists spread the word.

"It might eventually mean I could let more people know what's happening and also recruit more members," said Michael Nulty, president of Alliance for a Better District 6 and Tenant Associations Coalition program director. The two organizations have almost 1,000 members who get his email posts about TL news and events, 1,400 posts in the last two years, he said.

"Still, the benefits of Meraki's program are going to be a while coming," Nulty said. "There's a long learning curve — people

have to get computers, then they need to learn how to use them, how to do email, how to surf the Net."

McCarthy said the city has 50 city computers, all two to four years old, that are being refurbished for low-income residents in the Meraki network.

"They're Dell Pentiums with 20-gigabyte hard drives, all in working condition, all good quality," he said. "They'll probably cost \$125 to \$150 each. We're working with TNDC staff, and the agency will handle all the money and decide who gets the computers."

TNDC Executive Director Don Falk says he doesn't know how many residents will want a computer. "I don't have an alternative to having tenants pay for the computers," Falk wrote in an email, "but maybe someone will have an idea of a source where we can get funding."

Training also hasn't been discussed, Falk said, but St. Anthony's and S.F. Network Ministries' new Tech Lab is an obvious choice.

FREE WI-FI CITYWIDE NEXT YEAR

Meraki is building a citywide network. It gives free repeaters to anyone who will also mount Meraki outdoor gear on rooftops or windowsills, thus forming a mesh to extend the network. The company Website claims its network now covers about 10 square miles and is being used by 180,000 S.F. residents, up from 20,000 a year ago. It plans to blanket the entire city sometime in 2009.

Meraki has networks operating in 120 countries, but, its Website says, "We set out to Free the Net in our back yard, San Francisco." ■