According to the 2017 Point-in-Time count more than 5,500 people are experiencing homelessness in Alameda County. 69% of those are living outdoors or in places not meant for human habitation.

Alameda County has adopted a Coordinated Entry System (CES) for homeless services, with 6 regional Housing Resource Centers, or Hubs. BFHP operates the North County Hub for adults experiencing homelessness and seeking services in Berkeley, Emeryville and Albany. As part of this system we are tasked with serving the chronically homeless, those most in need, many of whom experience multiple barriers to finding and keeping housing. However, these very people who need our help the most are often the least likely to seek out services. Therefore we cannot simply wait for them to walk through our door. We must go out and meet them where they are.

Street outreach is an essential component of reaching and serving those most in need. BFHP operates a six-person full-time outreach team active in Berkeley, Albany, and Emeryville. They regularly visit homeless encampments, parks, downtown areas, shelters, free meals and anywhere else the homeless tend to congregate. The team is also focused on making connections with local businesses and law enforcement agencies. "Outreach isn't just outreach to the people who need us the most, but it's outreach to the community," says Intake and Outreach Supervisor, Robbi Montoya. She and her team regularly stop into local businesses to introduce themselves. They let business owners know that if there is a problem, they can contact our outreach team before calling the police.

During a typical encounter at a homeless encampment the team begins by announcing themselves and offering items to improve a person's immediate situation such as bottled water, energy bars, and socks. If the person seems receptive to interacting with the team they would then start up a deeper conversation. "It's pretty much like talking respectfully to a neighbor" says Robbi of her method. "If I keep that in mind I
BERKELEY WAY ANTIcIPATED TO BREAK GROUND IN EARLY 2019

Developed in partnership with BRIDGE Housing, the Berkeley Way project will bring much needed shelter and housing to downtown Berkeley.

BFHP’s portion will include:
- 53 units of permanent supportive housing for formerly homeless men and women
- Short-term housing for homeless adult men
- Transitional housing for homeless male veterans
- Commercial kitchen and dining facilities with room to serve our free weekday Community Meal
- Space for outside service providers such as Berkeley Mental Health and LifeLong Medical Care.

Changes at the Dwight Way Shelter

Our Men’s Shelter and Veterans Transitional Housing, formerly located in the basement of the Veteran’s Memorial Building on Center Street, has moved into our building at 2140 Dwight Way.

This is a temporary move until we complete construction of the new building on Berkeley Way, which will house the Men’s Shelter, Veterans Transitional Housing, 53 units of permanent supportive housing, and a commercial kitchen and dining facility.

The Dwight Way building had been home to our shelter for women and children since 1991. Per the current Countywide Coordinated Entry System, all families with children are now being referred to Family Front Door in Oakland and so we will only be serving single women in our women’s shelter. The new makeup of the shelter is: 32 beds for single women, 32 beds for single men, and 12 transitional housing beds for homeless male veterans.

Residents at Dwight Way: Jimmy from the Men’s Shelter, Adrienne from the Women’s Shelter, and Marlon from the Veterans Transitional Housing

The Dwight Way Shelter
Continued from page 1

don’t become condescending, I become friendly, I become inquisitive.” Of course not everyone the outreach team encounters on the street is going to respond positively at first, but as Robbi says, “People want to be heard. A big part of outreach isn’t just about finding immediate solutions, it’s about comfort, about letting people know that they’re heard, letting them know that someone cares about them — even a stranger.”

It often takes many visits to build up trust between members of the outreach team and the people they encounter. Once this trust has been established an individual may be willing to participate in an assessment, a series of questions that establishes what services they are eligible for. After assessment we are able to connect the homeless person with services appropriate to their situation and can often assign a case manager. Our case managers regularly accompany the outreach team in order to check in with their clients where they live.

Assessments are the first step on the road to housing, but they can be uncomfortable for those who may not be ready to face some of the things that led to their homelessness such as addiction, conviction history, or mental illness. That’s why Robbi and her team take a non-threatening approach. “You don’t just ask the questions, you have a conversation and the questions are asked in the course of that conversation.” Robbi recalls a particular young man she worked with at a Berkeley shelter. “I told him, ‘I want you to be able to tell me everything you feel comfortable about telling me in the worst case scenario. If there’s a drug problem I want to hear about it. If there’s a mental health problem, I should know about it because the more that you can embrace here, the quicker we can look at services.’”

What I said seemed to click, and then all of a sudden it came out that he had been a heroin user and he was still smoking crack and all this other stuff. We got him into Options Recovery Services the very next morning!

Working in homeless outreach can be rewarding and exhausting at the same time. Robbi often talks to her team about how to stay balanced while doing this job. “Nobody is in this field if they don’t care, so it can be a Catch 22. You find people to do this work who are empathetic and caring and nurturing individuals but at the same time you’re asking them to stay guarded to some degree.”

Ultimately, it’s the little successes that keep the team motivated. “My hope for the people that I meet is that they find enough value in themselves to reach for a little bit of a better life,” says Robbi. “It doesn’t have to be all or nothing. Every little thing can make a big difference, because small steps lead to large strides.”

ROBBI MONTOYA

INTAKE & OUTREACH SUPERVISOR

Robbi Montoya has been in social service of some sort for most of her career. She came to work at BFHP three years ago as our Albany Case Manager. As the Outreach Team grew a supervisor position was created. Robbi’s years of experience in the field made her an ideal candidate. Robbi says of her work, “It’s not what I do, it’s who I am. Even as a young person, I was doing something for someone in terms of helping.”

Born in Denver Colorado, but raised in Hayward since the age of two, Robbi says “I’m Bay Area all the way.” She now lives in Berkeley where she is raising her ten-year-old granddaughter, and teaching her about outreach. Robbi and her granddaughter have been handing out hamburgers to the homeless in Berkeley for the last three years, and Robbi says it has been a learning experience for her as well as her granddaughter. “I remember her asking me ‘Nana, how do I know who to give the hamburger to? How do I know who needs it the most?’ She taught me how to outreach better, because there’s a lesson there. How do we know? We can’t go cherry picking who we can help.”

Robbi also works for UC Berkeley on the weekends cleaning and doing outreach at People’s Park.

She devotes her spare time to her many hobbies including: building, yoga, and most of all creating Native American art inspired by her Zuni heritage.
FALL NEWSLETTER 2018

Read about our full-time homeless outreach team, changes at our Dwight Way Shelter, and more.

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Volunteering: volunteers@bfhp.org

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