



PO Box 2744
Petaluma CA 94953

And homeless near a
thousand homes I stood,
And near a thousand tables
pined and wanted food.

- William Wordsworth

In April, help us honor COTS Volunteers!



This spring, Redwood Credit Union has issued their second annual COTS challenge grant to our community – meaning **all donations received before April 30 will be matched up to \$15,000!** We are raising awareness of the match and honoring the people who bring our programs to life by featuring stories of our volunteers on social media throughout the month of April. We hope these stories will be a ray of sun in uncertain times, and inspire you to give back too – so that COTS programs can continue to serve those experiencing homelessness in our community.

Help us meet the match today at cots.org and by following us on Facebook and Instagram (@sonomacountycots).



COTS News



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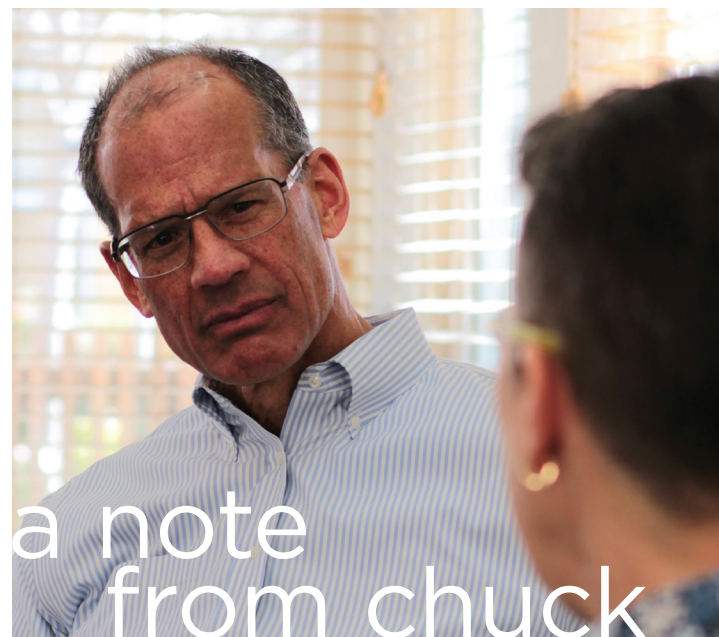
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Dear Friends,

As the local, state and national response to the Covid-19 crisis changes day by day, COTS staff continues to work steadfastly to feed, shelter, counsel and provide permanent housing to those experiencing homelessness in our community. In this issue, you will learn more about our response to the situation on the ground and our strategies for keeping our community healthy and safe.

First, while I know this newsletter will reach homes several weeks after the time of writing, **I wish to give profound thanks to those on the front lines of this crisis for the work you are doing now and for the work that will continue in the months to come.** From the first responders at our hospitals, including our doctors, nurses, administrative staff, and housekeepers, to those who keep our day to day lives running while many are sheltered in place. Those include our sanitation workers, grocery store employees, delivery personnel, teachers writing curriculum from home, and so many more.

At COTS, **I have been humbled by our Shelter and Case Management staff, who show up to work each day despite the**

risk to care for the most vulnerable in our society. They work long hours with full hearts, and extend themselves whenever a coworker needs help or a meal needs preparing. So many outside our walls, too, have stepped up for COTS' clients and staff: **you have made masks, donated a tremendous amount of goods, and responded with generosity whenever we communicate an immediate need** through social media. You'll read about many who have made a difference for COTS later in this newsletter.

You will also read about the **Sonoma County COVID-1 Homeless Team** and our county-wide efforts to protect those experiencing homelessness from the virus. Meanwhile, at the Mary Isaak Center, Shelter Services Manager Robin Phoenix is implementing strategies to ensure our clients here stay healthy, safe, and receive the best possible care.

I hope that, no matter what news may come, it gives you comfort to see that even in these most uncertain times, there are so many people in our community who are committed to giving back in large and small ways.

We are endlessly grateful to walk hand in hand with so many incredible community partners through whatever challenges come our way. Your engagement, your financial support, and your volunteerism are the secret ingredients that bring our programs to life. Thank you for supporting COTS and for uplifting those experiencing homelessness at this time of greatest need.

Please be safe,

Chuck Fernandez, CEO



People experiencing homelessness already have compromised physical, mental, and emotional systems. Living on the streets or in encampments with poor hygiene and dietary habits only make matters worse. For those coming into a shelter environment and living in a congregate environment, practicing "social distancing" is difficult.

So what is Sonoma County doing to address the homeless situation during these challenging times? Lots. They set-up an Emergency Operations Center (EOC) and a COVID-19 Homeless Team (Team) staffed with public health, medical, and City and County professional staff to direct homeless services and keep people safe. The EOC conducts twice weekly calls with all homeless providers in the County. We have several COTS staff on those calls.

The Team's focus is on three areas:

Mitigation Strategies, which emphasize physical distancing and cleanliness. All shelters must comply with the six-foot rule. For COTS, our bed capacity has been reduced from 112 beds to around 56 beds to accommodate this change. The County has placed 39 port-o-potties and hand washing stations throughout the County, including three in Petaluma.

The Team is also working on getting supplies to homeless providers – hand sanitizers, masks and gloves, and Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) as soon as possible. Food insecurity for the 2,000+ unsheltered is also important, so a separate Food Team is addressing that issue.

Overflow, which means finding a new spot for people displaced from the shelter because of physical distancing. Those over age 65 will be placed in a hotel/motel room. At the time of writing, this process had already started in Santa Rosa.

Quarantine, whereby the EOC is securing sites for people who need to be in isolation. There will likely be several sites across Sonoma County.

Things are changing rapidly and the EOC and Homeless Team are moving as fast as is humanly possible. They are taking this responsibility VERY seriously. By the time you get this newsletter, things will have already changed. We will do our very best to keep you updated through email, on our website at cots.org, and via social media. Thank you for your partnership as we rally around our neighbors experiencing homelessness at this uncertain time!

Shelter Services Manager Robin Phoenix answers questions about COVID-19 and our shelter operations

What are we doing at the shelters to keep people safe?

We're cleaning and sanitizing constantly. Every surface that people touch is being constantly cleaned. Everyone—staff and residents—is wearing a mask.

We're in daily communication with the city and the county. We're adhering to all the guidelines put out by the federal, state and county governments.

What does that mean for daily living?

That means we're reducing our population at the Mary Isaak Center by half in order to promote social distancing. Most of that is happening naturally as people leave to rentals or to stay with family. We've identified 17 people with chronic health conditions. These are people who would be most at risk for death if they got the Coronavirus. They will be our first candidates for hotel vouchers when those come online. Once they're in hotel rooms, we'll have achieved 50 percent occupancy.

In the dorm, we're surpassing the recommended six-foot distance between people by having people sleep head to foot and by leaving one bunk empty in each bunk bed. So, you have a person sleeping on a top bunk and then, in the next bed, a person is sleeping in the bottom bunk. That gives us a distance of seven feet.

At the family center, each family has their own room. In common spaces, we're encouraging appropriate distances and we've dedicated a room for two kids at a time, appropriately distanced, to do school work.

Thanks to Westamerica Bank our kids have the technology they need to keep up with their classes.

How about in the food program?

In our dining room, we're having several seatings at each meal so that we can maintain six feet between each diner. It's table service. We don't use a food line anymore. So, each person is served once they sit down. We also have a portable sanitation system in the dining room and everyone must wash their hands for the requisite 20 seconds before they're seated. We have someone monitoring that.

For diners who aren't our residents, we're giving them meals to-go. They're still the same hot, wonderful meals we serve in the dining room. We're just not inviting non-residents inside. Our doors are locked and monitored to ensure that only our residents are coming inside.

What services are you providing for non-residents?

Aside from our food program, we have porta-potties on-site and, on Fridays, the Redwood Gospel Mission brings portable showers. Our outreach team is incredible. Randy Clay and Jeff Schueller are going out to encampments every day to check on people, to provide food, clothing, resources.

Who's doing all the work?

You just have to love our team. We're staffed 24 hours a day and it's a challenging time. My site coordinators are doing outstanding work. And we have Chuck, our CEO, down in the kitchen every day helping out. That means



a lot to people. Our case managers are still focused on getting people into housing. Many of our volunteers are in an at-risk group. We've encouraged them to stay home. A big group of our residents are being helpful with cooking, cleaning and monitoring. They see us in the trenches and they want to help. We also have a lot of clients who are getting hired in grocery stores or warehouses or doing deliveries.

How are we helping people take care of their health?

Normally, the Petaluma Health Center provides an on-site clinic at the Mary Isaak Center. Nurse Practitioner Annie Nicol is in charge of that. She and her nurses are no longer allowed to come on campus.

Right now, we don't have any cases of Covid-19, but health problems go on.

Nurse Annie Nicol, who's worked with us for years, set up a tele-med station on our first floor. This was her brainchild. It's a private office where people can talk to people from the Petaluma Health Center. Annie personally trained a team of residents to help with the

process. After each appointment, one of our resident volunteers cleans and sanitizes the tele-med office so that it's safe for the next person.

What do you need?

We'd all appreciate testing. We'd like to be tested because we simply have no way to know if we're a carrier or not. It would also give our families some peace of mind, because although they're supportive of what we do, there's still a bit of fear around the virus spreading.

We really need a van to transport people to appointments. A passenger van with vinyl seats that we can clean and with at least 6 feet between the driver and the last row of seats.*

We also need financial donations. We need to take care of our hard-working employees, and to hire new ones. We need to be able to buy the equipment we need.

** After this interview took place, the City of Petaluma donated a passenger van to COTS! See page 7 to learn more.*



No matter what's in the headlines, the business of COTS goes on: each day, our staff work with clients as they transition from homelessness to a permanent home. We hope this story about one of our youngest clients and her family brings you the same feeling of joy it brings to us. Thank you for making our work possible!

Stacie was nine months pregnant when she and David arrived at COTS' Mary Isaak Center, looking for help.

"I was actually pacing in the lobby with false labor pains," Stacie says. "I was desperate. I didn't want to bring our baby home to live in a car."

Both of them knew they wanted something different for their child.

"Neither of us was raised right," David says. "We were pretty much on our own growing up, pretty much surrounded by people who weren't good influences. When we got together, we decided to change things for ourselves."

Together, and while still homeless, the couple stopped using drugs and alcohol. And they put distance between themselves and the friends and family who encouraged their drug use.

For David, who grew up in Geyserville, that meant leaving behind almost everyone he knew, including the Dad who had introduced him to drugs while David was in middle school. Despite his drug use and despite the fact that he had to work fulltime to keep the lights on and the cupboards full for himself and his little brother, David graduated from high school. He knew he liked learning.

"But the whole time, I was hanging out with my Dad and his friends, not kids my own age. And I realized one day that every single one of them had been to prison. Everyone I knew had killed someone or robbed a bank or was some kind of career criminal."

At 27, David had a brush with the law that could have turned into a disaster. Thankfully, it didn't.

He took it as a sign to change. "My friends would say that it proved I was lucky, and I should keep going. For me, I knew this was my chance. I felt it."

Stacie left home the day she turned 18 to escape a stepfather who was unpredictable in everything except his vindictiveness. "I never knew if I'd be locked in the house or locked out," Stacie says. "I never knew if he was going to lock the food up." Her mom told her she couldn't help. After leaving home, Stacie married and had children. But the marriage ended in divorce and a custody battle. She ended up homeless.

For her, starting to use drugs and quitting drugs were both about survival. "When you're out there, you use because you're cold," she says. "You use because you're hungry and it takes away your appetite. You use because you feel so bad. People just walk past, and you take that in and you feel invisible. You feel worse. So you use and you feel better."

Until one day after about six months of using, "I was almost dead. And I thought, **'My kids deserve better than this. If I was a kid I would want my mom to fight.' And I did. And I am.**"

Together, David and Stacie began to fight their way back. They lived first in a van and then in a car. And they stayed sober together. Stacie won back visitations with her children. As he always has, David worked. He worked a string of low-paying jobs until he found one in construction that paid well.

They spent over a year homeless.

Then, one day at the end of a workday, they came to the Mary Isaak Center. David talked to the site coordinator at our front desk while Stacie paced the lobby.

"Silvia, who worked there, took one look at me and said, 'What is going on?'" says Stacie. "She said, 'Come in here and talk to me.'"

That conversation set things in motion, and, with help from COTS' Rapid Re-Housing program, the couple moved into their own rental apartment three days before baby Hannah was born. "We took her home to a home," says David.

"COTS helped make it happen," says Case Manager Carmen Razo-Clark. "But they were persistent. They showed the landlord they were serious. It's what we wish every client could do." Thanks to David's construction job, they had the income to get back on their feet. And thanks to Stacie's organizational skills, they were able to wade through all the landlord's paperwork and all our paperwork. Stacie even convinced the landlord to lower the rent by a few dollars to ensure that the unit would fit our program guidelines.

Their can-do spirit springs from their partnership. "They are a team," Carmen says.

Carmen set them up with Rapid Re-Housing, a six-month program in which COTS would pay a portion of their rent while providing services and coaching. She met with Stacie and David regularly to go over their finances. "The budget, for me, is the most important thing," Carmen says. "If it's not balanced, that's how I know they need more support."

Soon after Hannah came home from the hospital, the family's landlord decided to sell the home and gave them notice to leave.

"Panic, that's what I felt," says Stacie. "I had a newborn. I was freaking out. Carmen just said, 'Let me look into it.'"



"The beauty of the program is that we are involved for many months," Carmen says. "If things go wrong, we can help." She made a call to a property manager who'd worked with COTS before and convinced her to meet Stacie and David.

"I let them know they would have to build a rapport and establish trust with the lady. They did the rest," Carmen says. The couple found their second apartment and moved in.

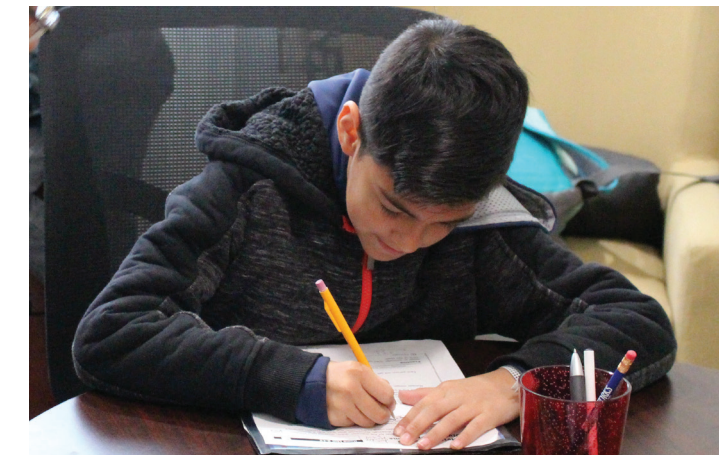
"So much about Rapid Re-Housing has been about people giving us a chance," says David. "Before this, I feel like we had so many doors closed on us."

Months have passed since COTS' financial payments ended. Now, David is working in auto sales and is studying to make a shift to the insurance industry. Stacie is staying at home with Hannah (who just turned one) and is pursuing shared custody of her other children. Her goal is to go to school in order to help other people regain their footing and find housing.

neighbors helping neighbors

This spring, as the headlines changed daily and we did our best to follow the shelter-in-place order to keep our community safe, you found new, creative, and essential ways to give back. We were overwhelmed with calls from donors, volunteers, and our business community – each making sure that our staff and clients at COTS had what they needed to continue providing food, sanitation, and housing to those experiencing homelessness at a time of great vulnerability.

We hope the stories below lift your spirits as they did ours and show why we are so very Petaluma Proud!



helping kids learn

In March, Wendy Lindberg, Case Manager at the Kids First Family Shelter, reached out to COTS’ fundraising team with a request: students at the shelter were being asked to complete their school work online, but many lacked the technology to do so. **Our Director of Grants, Kiera Stewart, sprang to action and contacted a partner at Westamerica Bank.** They, too, felt the urgency of the moment and within days pledged \$1,000 to secure tablets and headphones for our students – so that lack of access didn’t hold them back at school. Thank you, WestAmerica Bank!



mary’s table, to go!

Typically, our dining room at the Mary Isaak Center is open to anyone experiencing hunger at lunch and dinner. But with the onset of the shelter-in-place order, we knew it was no longer safe to serve everyone on site. COTS staff issued a call on Facebook and Instagram for donations of unused takeout boxes from our followers in the restaurant business—and **immediately friends at The Shuckery in Petaluma and Fishman’s Supply stepped up!** Now we are able to provide to-go meals for anyone who needs a hot meal, keeping our residents safe and our community fed.



crafters for cots

Just as the masks that St. John’s Episcopal Church donated were running out, an old-timey sewing circle has formed to make masks for staff and clients. Many thanks to **KC Greaney** for organizing this effort. To donate materials and/or sew some masks, please contact Eileen Morris at emorris@cots.org. Many, many thanks to St. Johns.



gloves to the rescue

Just as our sterile gloves were running out, **Petaluma Valley Hospital** came through with several boxes. That was followed by donations of gloves from **Petaluma Police and Fire departments.**



safe transport

In March, COTS staff began discussing our worst case scenario: if we needed to quarantine one of our clients, how would we safely transport that person between our shelter and the quarantine site in Santa Rosa without risking the health of our driver? That’s when the City of Petaluma stepped in: **Assistant Fire Chief Jeff Schach found an unused ParaTransit van in a City lot and worked with City staff to have it inspected and donated to COTS for this very need.** It has seats that can be easily sanitized and enough space to create a safe physical distance between driver and passenger. We cannot thank the following public servants enough for going the extra mile for our staff and clients!

- Petaluma Fire Department
Jeff Schach, Assistant Chief
- City of Petaluma
Jared Hall, Transit Manager
Brian Cochrane, Assistant City Manager
Jason Beatty, Public Works Director
Eric Danly, City Attorney

THANK YOU TO OUR 2020 BUSINESS SPONSORS!



why I give: **robyn níconney**



While she was going through a divorce, Robyn NíConney had a dark time where she struggled to feed her children. “It was only a few weeks,” she says, “and, luckily, I had people I could turn to. I had resources.”

wanted to help someone else,” Robyn says. “I chose my name in honor of her.” “Ni” means “granddaughter” in Irish, so Robyn’s chosen last name means “Granddaughter of Connie.”

Now, happy in a dual career as tech writer and musician, Connie’s granddaughter carries on the giving tradition with monthly donations to COTS.

“Monthly is easiest for me,” Robyn says. “I don’t even feel it every month, but it adds up over the year.”

“But I kept thinking, ‘What the heck do people do who don’t have that?’ That was terrifying to me.”

Robyn made a promise to herself that once she got back on her feet, she’d help others who were experiencing hard times. She had an example for giving in her maternal grandmother, Carolyn “Connie” Robinson. That widowed lady put her own daughter through college and then befriended another young woman and put her through college, too.

She picked COTS because she took a tour and was impressed. She appreciated that COTS has several former clients on staff, including in leadership positions. “To me, that means they know what works. It’s not just theory for them,” Robyn says. She also liked that COTS has “a ladder” to help people back into housing and was particularly happy to hear about our master-leased Integrity Housing program.

Many thanks to Robyn. If you’re out and about, you may hear her fiddling with her traditional Irish music band, The Snug.

“She gave without thinking. She just knew she

why I give: **brady coppo**

Brady Coppo’s English teacher asked her students at Petaluma Junior High to read “A Christmas Carol” and then take action inspired by what they’d read.

Dickens asked the question “What is the business of humanity?” Brady says: “I’ve had a pretty good life and I want others to have the same privileges and opportunities.” So, in addition to writing an essay for his teacher, Brady took his babysitting proceeds and donated them to COTS.

One day, the future astronaut also plans to bring his love of the stars to kids in our program by sharing his telescope with the families at Vida Nueva in Rohnert Park. Thank you, Brady!



Brady among the stars at the California Academy of Sciences



Your gifts mean more now than ever.

We want to keep COVID-19 out of our shelters and permanent housing programs. And if the virus arrives, we want to limit its progress. None of us knows how many homeless people will be stricken. But we do know that they are more vulnerable than most. **Your support will allow us to provide stronger sanitation, effective outreach, adaptable facilities and additional staffing.**

And you support will help us in the longer-term, too. The economic fallout from the jobs we’re losing in this county may rain down for months—long after shelter-in-place ends. We have the homeless prevention and rapid-rehousing programs to provide transformative assistance. **Your donation today will help us fund those programs in the months to come.**

We are grateful to have you and people like you as allies in this fight. **Your deep compassion and your determination to leave no one behind give us the courage and capacity to manage this crisis.** With your support and the support of others like you, we’ve been weathering crises and transforming lives for over 30 years.

We hope you’ll continue to invest in our shared work. In this time of uncertainty, we need you more than ever.

Thank you for your partnership in ending homelessness. Thank you for helping us flatten the curve.

2020 Stimulus Bill Update: With the passage of the 2020 Stimulus Bill, taxpayers have more flexibility to deduct for charitable donations. This year, all taxpayers will be eligible to take a new above-the-line deduction for total charitable contributions of up to \$300, even if you take the standard deduction. The existing cap on annual contributions for itemizers of 60 percent of adjusted gross income (AGI) is lifted and now is up to 100 percent.

ways to give:



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To learn more about giving to COTS, visit cots.org/ways-to-give, or contact Jamieson Bunn, Director of Development, at jbunn@cots.org or (707) 789-6380.



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