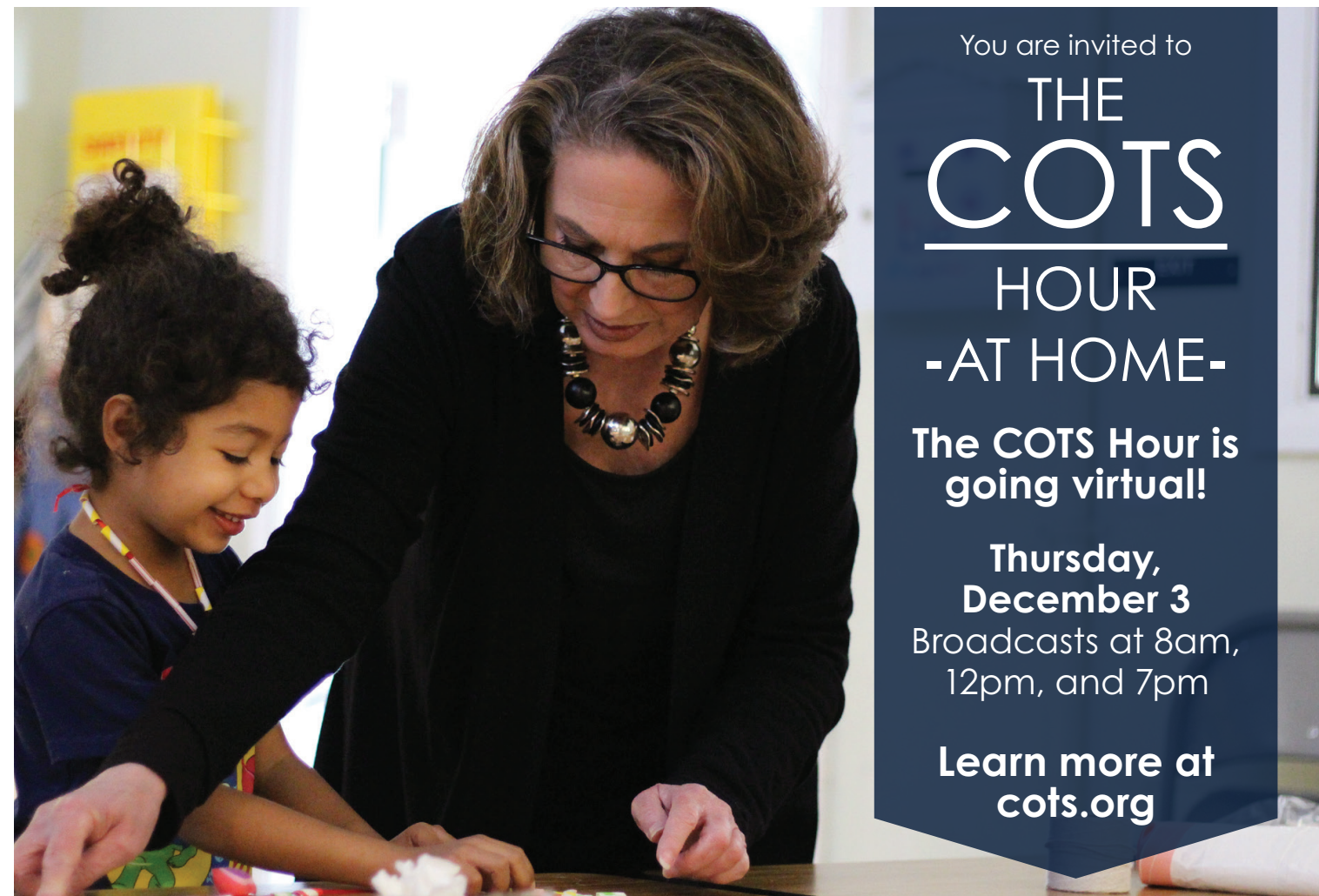




PO Box 2744
Petaluma CA 94953

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

- William Wordsworth



You are invited to
**THE
COTS**
HOUR
-AT HOME-

The COTS Hour is
going virtual!

Thursday,
December 3
Broadcasts at 8am,
12pm, and 7pm

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matters





a note from chuck

Dear COTS family,

As the holiday season approaches, we have a difficult year to reflect on, and still, much to be grateful for. Here at COTS, we have experienced many changes in 2020. But I am inspired by the way our staff have met each change or challenge with creativity, determination and open-mindedness.

At the Mary Isaak Center in January, we were hosting nearly 140 residents per night in both our dorm and Winter Shelter beds for those needing a warm and dry place to sleep. By April, Winter Shelter was over along with all semblance of normalcy, as the COVID-19 pandemic changed the way we serve our clients in more ways than one.

In our fall 2020 newsletter, we reflect on some of the ways we've used this time of change to reimagine our offerings for clients and staff alike. We have added supports for mental health and important collaborations in our Outreach program that enable us to better assist those living outside

COTS' walls. With fewer clients onsite due to social distancing restrictions, we also used our time to improve our data collection so that funders will have full confidence in the impact of their support – and our programs and services will be more effective in the long run.

I hope that this newsletter will inspire you as it did me, with the reassurance that no matter what challenges we face as a community, we can meet them together if we remain creative and determined.

Your partnership makes all the difference in our work. Thank you for helping us realize a future where everyone has a place to call home.

I wish you all a safe, healthy, and happy holiday season.

Until we end homelessness,

Chuck Fernandez

Chuck Fernandez



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mental health services at cots

This year, we could all probably use a little mental health support – as even the most fortunate among us may have dealt with job loss, social isolation, impacts from COVID, and another year of devastating wildfires.

Our homeless population is suffering too, and COTS is doing our best to meet the moment with new offerings for clients and increased training for staff.

In partnership with the International Trauma Center and the Hanna Institute, COTS staff joined homeless services providers from around Sonoma County to learn more about “Trauma Informed Care” (TIC): a way of engaging clients that accepts the traumatic experiences that many homeless individuals may have faced, such as violence or abuse, loss of a loved one, or another event that creates lasting emotional damage. That trauma can affect the way that clients engage with people and the world around them and prevent them from moving on towards productive and stable lives.

These trainings allowed COTS staff to learn coping techniques to help them redirect clients who might be stuck in their trauma, to better help them find long-term solutions for housing, employment and more.

Debbie Robbins, Integrity Housing Case Manager, said that the trainings reminded staff “that people react and behave the way they do because of brain development, stress, triggers and trauma. When we can remember these reasons, then we can learn not to take their behavior personally and work on what CAN be done to help this individual and help them to recognize their strengths.”

TIC also helps service providers engage with clients who have trauma, without absorbing that trauma themselves (leading to secondary PTSD and excess toxic stress chemicals). Or as Dr. Robert Macy, President of the International Trauma Center, put it: **“Social workers, case workers, outreach workers are at the same risk of secondary PTSD as police officers and fire fighters. Are we treating ourselves as if we’re worthy to survive our work?”**

We are grateful to Dr. Macy and organizers Erin Hawkins, Co-Director of the Hanna Institute (and COTS Board member!) and Daniel Weinzveg, M.A., Organizational Development, for inviting us to participate!

Also in 2020, we launched a partnership with Petaluma Family Therapy (PFT) for COTS’ clients so that those who wish to access video counseling even in the midst of the pandemic can do so. The collaboration started in August and is available to COTS clients enrolled in Medi-Cal through Partnership HealthPlan. (This includes a majority of our shelter and housed residents.) We hope during the year to come, clients in need of a little extra support will continue to take advantage of the therapists available through PFT.

We know that the need for mental health services will only increase, and COTS staff are committed to exploring new opportunities and partnerships to serve our clients across a range of needs. Your support allows us to meet these needs with creativity and compassion. Thank you for your investments in COTS and those experiencing homelessness throughout Sonoma County!

2020 at COTS: Battling COVID through Collaboration

This year has presented unique challenges for clients and staff alike at COTS. But we are thrilled to report that, as of October 2020, we have only had a single isolated case of COVID-19 among the hundreds of clients we served – and all credit is due to our incredible staff for keeping so many people safe! But how did they do it?



advance planning

In February, stories about the Coronavirus were beginning to pop up in the national news, although no widespread rules for prevention had yet been put in place. But Shelter Services Manager Robin Phoenix wasn't taking any chances. Robin knows that viral and bacterial infections can spread rapidly in shelters, due to the close quarters and shared facilities of our staff and residents. COVID-19 would be no different if it were to hit Petaluma.

We also know that in 2019, **about 23% of the homeless population reported having chronic health conditions that make them more likely to experience severe symptoms if they did catch the virus** – so, it was all hands on deck to keep residents at the Mary Isaak Center and Kids First Family Shelter safe before COVID struck.

We started with a mask mandate for staff and residents beginning in February and updated cleaning protocols. We provided masks to anyone who did not have their own, including non-residents through our Outreach program. By April, the Petaluma Masketeers, a local volunteer group lead by K.C. Greaney, had arranged a program providing masks to a host of non-profits including COTS (by the writing of this article, COTS has received more than 900 masks from these amazing Masketeers!). At the same time, we started reducing the number

of clients at our shelters to allow better social distancing. **We did this as organically as possible, by not filling beds as clients departed on their own in February and March and by identifying our most vulnerable residents to be moved to available dorm rooms at SSU or alternative sites.** We reduced the number of clients sleeping at the Mary Isaak Center by almost half by April, and by moving bunks farther apart and asking residents to sleep head-to-toe, we were able to create more than 6 feet of distance between clients throughout the day and night.

Our meal program changed too, as we closed our dining room to off-campus visitors and began providing take-out meals to anyone in need. Residents were required to social distance in the dining room, with new hand-washing stations provided onsite and strict sanitizing protocols in place. Later in the summer, Rebuilding Together Petaluma helped us exchange our temporary hand-washing station for a permanent installation in the dining room – a welcome addition that will help guard against cold and flu season as well!

All of this was possible with the rapid response and partnership of the City of Petaluma, and many community members and volunteers who flew to action in the weeks following Shelter-in-Place.



community outreach

While staff within COTS' walls were busy keeping residents safe, Randy Clay and Jeff Schueller continued their Outreach work to unsheltered members of our community.

While Randy's focus is on helping people find treatment for substance use, Jeff interacts with anyone experiencing homelessness no matter where they are in their journey towards housing. Jeff spent much of the year bringing take-out meals from Mary's Table to people living in encampments, while also doing his part to keep COVID at bay. He took peoples' temperatures during his rounds and, in consultation with our

partners at the Petaluma Health Center, asked the standard questions about COVID symptoms so that anyone who was feeling unwell could access screening and treatment through PHC.

He also helped arrange transportation for homeless individuals to the SSU dorms or other safe locations in cases of extreme vulnerability. This work increased after the City of Petaluma provided COTS with an unused paratransit van specifically to help transfer people between south county encampments, COTS, and SSU. Jeff followed all cleaning protocols for the van to make sure every rider experienced the safest possible ride, day after day.

At the same time, Randy and Jeff gave presentations to local business owners about how to engage with homeless individuals near their workplaces and what resources COTS can offer to those looking for food or shelter.

As our Outreach Program became more and more important this year, COTS staff found new ways to engage with our community to serve our unsheltered population. Our grants team also took time to learn more about Randy and Jeff's work as a whole so they can better search for funding opportunities to grow the program in the future.

learning from the past

During Thanksgiving 2019, a nasty stomach flu passed through the Mary Isaak Center – spreading quickly to clients and forcing us to adjust our plans for non-residents hoping for a warm and welcoming celebration. Annie Nicol, of the Petaluma Health Center, says, “We had to think very, very quickly. I contacted public health, but they were closing up for the four-day holiday. **So it was all hands on deck at COTS. We started to separate people, put food in boxes, set up handwashing stations, and more. We were able to eradicate the illness after a couple of days.** It was a good learning experience, prior to COVID-19. Everyone was on board to protect our clients and that served us well. By the time the pandemic came around, we had an idea of how to prepare.”



local collaborations make all the difference

COTS staff are experts in their fields, but we can't do our work alone. Last year, Robin Phoenix, Jeff Schueller and others from the COTS team started meeting with local community partners to support our work. That work became even more crucial after the start of the pandemic, and we began to focus those meetings on support for those living unsheltered around Petaluma.

These Monday Meetings have become a virtual Justice League of Petaluma superheroes fighting homelessness, including:

- Lt. Tim Lyons, *Petaluma Police Department*
- Brian Cochran, *Assistant City Manager, City of Petaluma*
- Wendi Thomas, *Director of Nursing at Petaluma Valley Hospital*
- Annie Nichol, *Director of Homeless Services at the Petaluma Health Center*
- Karen Strolia, *Director of the North Bay, Downtown Streets Team*
- Stephanie Bastianon, *Friends of the Petaluma River*

Their aim was to collaborate on finding encampments, providing resources to those living outside in Petaluma (including food, healthcare, and help finding housing/shelter if desired), and keeping our city land and river

clean even as the encampments moved or spread. Currently, the entire team is working on keeping Steamer Landing Park safe for daily after-school programs. We use a multi-prong approach and address the needs of unsheltered individuals along with the safety of the general community.

By strengthening these relationships with our local partners, we have helped each other stay informed about the unsheltered population to support people as well as we can. Sometimes Robin or Jeff will call in the Petaluma Police to help address a situation; sometimes the PPD call our staff to connect with someone living outside and offer options and resources. We also take referrals from the PPD for twelve beds at the Mary Isaak Center funded by the City of Petaluma. And together, we are seeing tremendous success.

In September, after several months of engagement, Jeff and Randy were able to help an unsheltered couple, dubbed "the archaeologists" for their habit of collecting rocks and unused objects around their camp, move into a trailer at the Fairgrounds in Santa Rosa. This is a win for everyone and will allow the City a chance to clean up the ground near the river where they had been camping.

"It is imperative that the city of Petaluma have a coordinated command to address the health and safety of our community. This includes homelessness, mental health, physical health and physical safety....As a board member of COTS and the Director of Nursing at Petaluma Valley Hospital, I can assure you that **the viability and success of COTS is a success for the entire community of Petaluma.** Now, more than ever we need to join hands and efforts. Without COTS and the services they provide to our most vulnerable population it would be even more challenging for the Police Department, Fire Department and Hospital."

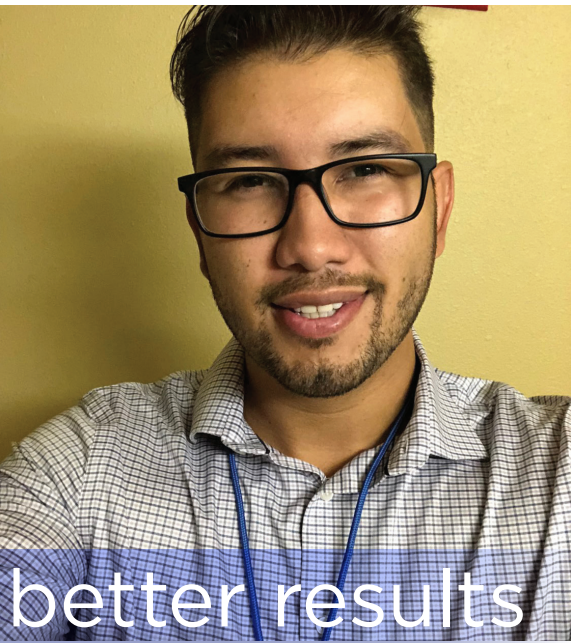
– Wendi Thomas,
Petaluma Valley Hospital

"The rainbow of these disasters of COVID and the fires are that people are really thinking outside the box – it's the phoenix rising out of the ashes. We're really looking at new ways of caring for our most vulnerable populations."

– Annie Nichol,
Petaluma Health Center

"Getting the couple moved to Santa Rosa happened because of the entire collaboration during our Monday afternoon calls," Jeff notes. "We worked together and stuck with them, ensuring they took advantage of the housing opportunity created through our collaboration with Allan Powell [Sonoma County Public Health Investigator] and his team of county employees." Jeff continues to check in with the couple every few weeks up in Santa Rosa.

We are excited to continue collaborations that support our homeless community throughout the winter and look forward to updating readers about this work in 2021.



better data, better results

Kiera Stewart, left, Director of Grants, and Jaime Murillo-Mena, right, work together with the rest of the Grants team to ensure integrity of data across COTS programs.

In early 2020, after almost a year in her role, Kiera Stewart, COTS' Director of Grants, was noticing a pattern. While our frontline staff was knowledgeable, dedicated, and compassionate, data entry and client record-keeping was often too far down on the list of priorities.

Accurate information about our work and the clients we serve is important for two reasons. First, if we know who we're serving – and who we're likely to serve in the future – we can better adapt our programs and services to meet the needs of our community. Additionally, if we can show our funders accurate data, including numbers and demographics of people served and those clients' outcomes over time, donors will better understand the impact of their support and be more willing to invest in COTS in the future. It's a win-win!

That's why Kiera implemented new strategies in partnership with our staff to improve data entry, begin regular trainings, and offer feedback so that we could be sure of our results year-to-year. A major step in this effort was hiring Jaime Murillo-Mena as Data and Information Specialist. His role is to analyze our systems for errors and work with Case Managers and Site Coordinators to improve their data entry and

technical skills. And after six months of effort, the Community Development Commission (responsible for funding decisions for homeless services in Sonoma County) was impressed! They wrote, "It is evident that the COTS Mary Isaak Center Emergency Shelter has been making significant improvements during challenging times."

Kiera notes, "It's been incredibly rewarding to see improvements in the data we're collecting, and it really reflects a true team effort across the organization – everyone has embraced the challenge. **Now we're in a better position to evaluate and improve our outcomes, strengthen our funding streams, and to better communicate the impact COTS is making.**"

Thrilled with this progress, COTS also started tracking new information every time a client entered our programs, including the impact of COVID-19 on homeless individuals in our area.

We hope that more reliable program data will show our funders that we use their donations wisely and efficiently – and encourage greater investments in our work, and our clients, for the long run.

THANK YOU TO OUR 2020 BUSINESS SPONSORS!



preventing homelessness in 2020: common threads, uncommon need

As COTS' storytellers, we're in charge of interviewing clients and finding examples of the lives impacted by our work. While we normally try to share a range of stories across the year to show the breadth of our work, in 2020, one narrative in particular has become a recurring theme: an individual, often leaving a bad relationship or losing a job in the midst of the pandemic, trying to keep afloat through a series of storms. In our Summer 2020 newsletter, you met Gina – a mom in our homelessness prevention program. Here, you'll meet two more clients in similar circumstances, both of whom were able to stay housed with the generous support of our donors and community.

We hope that by publishing the stories of people who live different lives but who share common threads, we can better highlight the growing need for homelessness prevention services across our community, after a year that has been difficult for so many.

If you or someone you know is in need of our homelessness prevention services, please call **Sarah Vetter, Homelessness Prevention Case Manager, at 707-765-6530 ext. 201**. And thank you to all our donors for your support, which allows us to help clients like Gina, Caitlin, and Lorna get back on their feet no matter what life throws their way.

this was particularly bad time for Lorna. The week of the shelter-in-place order, she'd been in the hospital, recovering from injuries inflicted by her boyfriend. The good news: he was arrested and gone from her life. The bad news: now she had to pay his half of the rent. And she was isolated, living alone in the Petaluma rental where she'd been attacked.

Lorna used her savings and her stimulus. She sold her clothes on Ebay and managed to get the rent paid for April. She was approved for an extension of her unemployment benefits because of the pandemic, but they didn't materialize in time for May's bills. They didn't arrive by June, either.

Lorna found COTS' Homeless Prevention Program and we were able to invest a little over \$3,000 to get her caught up. She got back on her feet, and began the search for less expensive housing.

"I had to push myself through this process," Lorna says. "It was such a bad time. There were days when I was just crying, thinking 'I can't handle this.' But I did get it done. I feel like I've grown in a sense." She completed her lab class and this summer, she took her state exam.

Wish her luck! And as Lorna says, don't forget to floss!



If all had gone according to Lorna's perfectly timed-out plan, she would have been working as a dental hygienist for months by now. One SRJC lab class and one state exam—that's all she needed to qualify.

Lorna had enrolled in the certificate program after getting laid off from a restaurant job. She'd always been interested in dentistry, and she could use her unemployment to go to school. Her benefits were scheduled to run out just as she completed all her requirements.

Then COVID-19 – and shelter-in-place – arrived. You can't complete a lab class online.

There's never a good time for a pandemic, but



At the beginning of the year, Caitlin's husband moved out, leaving her to pay the rent for herself and their 3-year-old daughter, Nora. Luckily, Caitlin's dad, who was already providing childcare, was happy to watch Nora one more day a week so that Caitlin could pick up another shift at her dog-grooming job. It wasn't going to be a piece of cake, but Caitlin thought she could make things work.

Then, the pandemic hit, and her employer had to lay off everyone at the store.

"My world imploded and then, two months later, the whole world imploded. I know they say you'll never get more than you can handle. But the universe must think I can handle a lot," Caitlin says.

She quickly applied for unemployment benefits. Though approved, those benefits didn't arrive in time to pay her bills. She used her stimulus payment and her savings to pay her rent in April and managed to squeak out a half payment for the month of May.

"My landlord was my tenth grade English teacher. She's been fantastic," Caitlin says. "She's really supportive. When the rope had reached its end, it felt really bad to tell her, 'I have nothing to give you.'"

Caitlin found COTS' homeless prevention program and was able to secure payment of her June rent and her back rent for May, as well as back payments to PG&E.

In June, her employer was able to re-open, and Caitlin is back at work, earning again. Even with her paycheck re-started, she wasn't prepared for the next thing the universe threw at her. Her husband, represented by an attorney, served her with divorce papers.

Caitlin wanted a fair shot when it came to child custody and financial arrangements but couldn't afford a lawyer. COTS was able to connect her with our partner, Asya Sorokurs from Sonoma County Legal Aid. Asya helped Caitlin respond to her husband's motion. "I feel much more confident about the whole thing now," Caitlin says. "I'm ready for what's coming next."

"It's really wild to have had such lows and such highs this year," Caitlin says. **"The beginning of quarantine was a dark place for me. But I put in the work and I came through it. I learned that I can take on a lot."** And she learned who she can count on. She is grateful for her parents, her employer, her landlord, and those who support COTS.

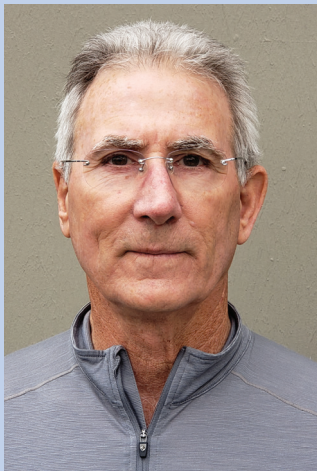
COTS invested about \$2500 in helping Caitlin. That money ensured that she and Nora could remain in their home. And it did more, Caitlin says. Without the burden of debt, she can think about her future.

She just turned 30 and has been taking on more responsibilities at work. She's in talks with her boss about managing a second location. She's also focusing on Nora. "Her pediatrician calls her a 'future CEO' and that's what I'm raising her to be," Caitlin says. "I want her to be strong and independent. I want her to be body-positive and feelings-positive. And that means I have to lead by example."

petaluma investing in people

On October 19, 2020, the City Council in Petaluma approved a \$150,000 grant to COTS for rental assistance, to be spent over three years through our Homelessness Prevention program. These funds will be used to keep clients like Lorna and Caitlin in their homes when times are hard. Thank you to the City Council for this generous investment in the people of Petaluma – we are so grateful for your foresight and support!

donor spotlight: willie mcdevitt



Willie McDevitt is invested in his community. And as founder of McDevitt Construction Partners, he's built a lot of it.

He and his family have supported COTS since our founding, with generous donations, volunteer support and community engagement.

When Willie's daughter was a teenager, she tutored kids at our family shelter and read them stories. In our early days, we had some shoestring operation moments, and we could call on the McDevitt family when we were short on supplies. On their own dime, they'd do some emergency warehouse shopping for us. And they got their friends involved, too.

Once, Willie remembers, he put out a donation jar for COTS at a party. His friends were so generous that Willie was able to buy a pallet of spaghetti sauce and a case of pasta.

Their reasons for giving are simple, Willie says. "Nobody wants to be homeless. Most people who become homeless end up there through no fault of their own. I feel that COTS take the dollars we send and leverages those funds to do great work."

COTS CEO Chuck Fernandez says, "Willie is a gracious and genuine human being. He always wants to know more about our progress and the challenges we're having. He's one of those people that you can call for advice and he will return your call as quickly as possible. We're thinking of expanding our campus, and he immediately offered his help and expertise. He wants to be involved. I had to laugh because he had just finished telling me how he wants to retire and wear his flip flops more." Thank you, McDevitt family!

partner fundraiser spotlight

This fall three local businesses found unique ways to support COTS by hosting their own fundraisers benefitting COTS. We're so grateful for their support, the funds raised and for raising awareness of homelessness in Sonoma County.



ray's catering

In partnership with W Bradley Electric, Ray's Catering held two fundraisers for COTS this fall with 15% of proceeds benefitting COTS. Together, the two fundraisers raised over \$1,500!



the shuckery

Petaluma's first oyster bar found a unique way to support COTS this fall. Bring an item from our holiday food donation wishlist to The Shuckery to receive 10% off your meal! Our wishlist can be found online at cots.org/holiday-help



deb garber

Local artist Deb Garber held a "pay as you wish" art sale at Out West Garage on October 17. All proceeds for the sale went directly to COTS. The event was a tremendous success, raising nearly \$7,000! Thank you Deb and Maria from Out West for creating this opportunity!

We are so grateful to these local businesses for supporting COTS and for our communities generosity. To learn how to host your own fundraiser for COTS contact **Erin Krueger** at ekrueger@cots.org.



This year, investments in COTS' work have gone farther than ever, allowing us to pivot when needed and serve both our neighbors experiencing chronic homelessness and those facing job loss or eviction for the first time. **We hope you will continue to make COTS a philanthropic priority to ensure that everyone in Sonoma County has access to shelter, supportive services, nutritious meals, and more – no matter what the future holds.**

Gifts to COTS are tax-deductible, and there are a variety of ways to make a gift to suit individual donor objectives. The Development Office welcomes inquiries about ways to structure your gift and invites you to consider the giving options listed below.

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:



ONLINE, CASH, OR CHECK



APPRECIATED SECURITIES & STOCKS



MATCHING GIFTS



LEAVE A LEGACY

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.

holiday help

The holidays may look different this year, but COTS clients still need your help to make them merry and bright. Check out some ways you can help below.



donate food

Looking to bring some cheer for the holidays? Between now and Christmas, Mary's Table is looking for food items to help make this season bright for all COTS clients. For a complete list of items needed, please visit cots.org/holiday-help.



While we can't open our holiday free store this year, our clients sent their holiday wishlists to CVNL's Secret Santa program. If you'd like to fulfill a wish, visit secretsantanow.org to adopt a heart or letter; once you have selected, you will receive instructions for touchless donations. "This year needs are even greater due to COVID-19 and the recent fires," said Buffy Welch, the Secret Santa Program Coordinator. "If we can get more people adopting hearts and letters this year, we will be able to create holiday miracles for those who are struggling."