



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

## Help us Meet our Match!

Once again, Redwood Credit Union is renewing their annual fundraising challenge! **If COTS can raise \$15,000 before June 15, 2022, RCU pledges an additional \$15,000 in support.** It's the perfect time to rally in support of those experiencing homelessness in our community!

**Please help us reach our matching goal with a gift today! Visit [cots.org](https://cots.org) or scan to donate.**



Thank you so much for your investment in COTS and our community! And a huge thanks to Redwood Credit Union for making this matching campaign possible. Together, we can create a community where everyone has a place to call home.



**SPRING NEWS  
2022**

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# A Note From Chuck

Dear COTS Friends and Family,

When this newsletter reaches you, you can bet that COTS staff are busier than ever. It has been my honor to watch this organization thrive over the last four years as we’ve been intentional about hiring the right team to serve our clients in their most vulnerable moments. But something extra special is in the air this spring, and it’s affecting staff and clients alike.

At a recent Board meeting, Director of Shelter Services Robin Phoenix reported on the incredible work our frontline staff are doing. It makes my heart swell to see that COTS is truly hitting its stride, and I’m thrilled to be able to share some of that good news with our community.

Janin Harmon, our Executive Chef, is realizing a goal of getting more creative with her menus while also providing over 8,000 meals this year to our partner organizations like the Interfaith Food Pantry at Elim Lutheran Church and PEP Senior Housing, in addition to the 60,000 meals she serves annually to our clients and community members here at the Mary Isaak Center.

Stacie Questioni and Randy Clay are proving to be an exceptional team, excelling in their respective roles of People’s Village Case Manager and Lead Outreach Specialist to connect with our People’s Village residents and support them in their sometimes-rocky transitions to safety and stability. They are helping some who have wanted to make a change for a long time but lacked an option like People’s Village that would work for them, and a few that we never thought would leave the encampments, but who are not only here but engaging in services for the first time.

At our weekly meetings to review the list of known people experiencing homelessness in Petaluma, we are carefully strategizing about how to get each individual experiencing homelessness in Petaluma into shelter, a People’s Village unit, or substance abuse treatment as soon as possible. This is collaborative process with the City of Petaluma, Downtown Streets Team, the Petaluma Police Department, the Petaluma Health Center, and other partners. So far, together, we have moved 25 people into People’s Village, and our Mary Isaak Center shelter is almost at capacity for the first time since COVID began. For Petaluma, this is a best-case scenario at a time when many of us have needed something to celebrate.

Of course, none of this would be possible without our wider community. Your investment makes the difference in our ability to serve the broad range of clients and guests we engage with every day – from donations of books to our family shelter, welcome mats to People’s Village, or financial donations which ensure that our team can do their best work for the long haul.

Our team’s success is your success, too. I am so grateful for your partnership in all that we do.

Yours sincerely,

*Chuck Fernandez*  
Chuck Fernandez, CEO



# Meet the Board

## Safi Ahmed



For as long as he can remember, Safi has always had a passion for serving the underserved. “I don’t really know where it came from,” he says. “My mom is very charitable, so service was always instilled in us, but I ran with it.”

While in high school, he fell in love with volunteering, and continued into college. He also spent some time abroad, including two years with the Peace Corps in South Africa. “When I was abroad took a step back,” he says, “‘cause people would just tell me things they were struggling with or going through, and looking back, that’s how it’s always been. So I thought, what role is this?” Initially he thought being a primary care physician, but when a colleague suggested psychiatry, “I explored it,” he says, “and it just seemed to make sense.”

Then, during his residency at St. Vincent’s de Paul in San Diego, he had the opportunity to work with those experiencing homelessness. “My clinic was a safety net clinic for the homeless,” he says, “and being there was my favorite aspect of residency. I loved the population, and I really enjoyed the work. It just became my happy place.”

Now, Safi is a Family Physician and Psychiatrist at Petaluma Health Center, where he serves many people experiencing homelessness, including COTS clients. He looks forward to the day when he can provide care directly at the Mary Isaak Center. “I’ve always dreamed of doing street medicine, meeting people where they’re at,” he adds. “I’d love to work with something like the SAFE Team. It’s not just about medication to me, I really like being with people and spending time with people. It’s a calling for me.”

Safi joined the COTS Board in 2021, served on the COTS DEIB team, and is excited to bring his experience with mental health to the board.

## Thais Rains



“I’m a Jersey girl,” says Thais with a laugh, by way of introductions. The daughter of Cuban immigrants, the first in her family born in the US, she was raised with the idea of volunteering and giving back as a way of life. “My entire family was always very community- and civic-minded,” she says. “I think I went to protest marches in the UN against communism in Cuba before I could even walk.”

After her family immigrated to the United States, they continued to help others wherever they could. “Our household was always very much about giving back time to the community,” Thais says. “My parents came here basically with nothing, and with the little that we had, it always went to help somebody else. Me and my sister, any time we outgrew clothes, they went to families. My mom always found homes for everything.”

Thais is an Associate Director at Protiviti, a global consulting firm, and now lives in Penngrove, where she shares a house and granny unit with her father, uncle, aunts, husband, and two children. “We were able to get a house because everybody pooled their money together,” she says. “Even with the success that I have had, there’s not a lot separating me from the people that we serve. God forbid something happens where I can’t work or my husband can’t work, we will be in the same situation, so to me I’m just helping people that got into circumstances that, knock on wood, I haven’t had to face.”

She joined the COTS Board in 2021, and is proud to be a part of the COTS Family. “I’m thankful for [being a part of the board], having the opportunity to understand at a deeper level the things that are being done to help people,” she says. “We can’t help everyone, but for those that are ready to be helped...I think it’s just amazing the work that’s being done.” She currently serves on the COTS Board Finance Committee and the CEO Search Committee, helping us find the next leader that take our organization into the future.





*New resident Bradley stands inside his unit, furnished with a bed, dresser, rug, and mirror.*

A rooftop view of the units (below) shows the recently constructed front walkway and the lights on the front of the units that provide safety and dignity. The orange barriers will be replaced with more permanent low fencing when the rest of the units are constructed.



Per the site plan, the area behind these units is being cleared for additional parking, bathroom and laundry facilities, and a dog run for clients with pets.

Pet ownership is one of the largest barriers for homeless individuals in coming into shelter. While living in the encampments, animals can be essential for safety and companionship. However, most shelters do not accept pets – and naturally, those experiencing homelessness are often unwilling to abandon their pets for a temporary shelter stay. People's Village allows guests to bring their pets along with them, and a partnership with our neighbor North Bay Animal Services (the two-story barn just visible in the center distance of the photograph to the left) will ensure that all incoming animals are healthy and vaccinated to more safely share the space within People's Village.

## The Next Stop on the Road to Stability

People's Village represents a new stop on the road towards stability for clients who have typically been the most difficult to serve. However, it is not the final destination. That's why COTS is partnering with the City of Petaluma, Sonoma County, and Burbank Housing on another project to create 60 units of Permanent Supportive Housing in the former America's Best Value Inn in Petaluma. This project will add significantly to Petaluma's housing stock for homeless individuals needing continued support and reduce homelessness in south Sonoma County by 10%. We look forward to launching this project in Fall/Winter 2022.

# People's Village Site Progress

This spring, COTS has been thrilled to begin opening People's Village – a project to place 25 individual shelter units on the Mary Isaak Center campus in Petaluma – to new residents. People's Village is designed to serve the most vulnerable single adults currently experiencing homelessness in Petaluma and was launched in partnership with the City of Petaluma.

will work together to make referrals to the People's Village, with a priority on vulnerability and length of time homeless. We are currently prioritizing former and current residents of the Steamer Landing encampment who are in possession of housing vouchers. This will enable us to work with the individuals most likely to find housing at this time, and we have already identified around 30 potential residents with whom our staff have been engaging for months or years in some cases.

## A View of the Current Site

At the writing of this newsletter in early May, units 1-9 are currently occupied with former residents of Steamer Landing Encampment in Petaluma. The final 16 units have been constructed and will be ready to welcome new residents before May 15. Potential residents have already been identified, and we are just awaiting finishing touches on the decking and the final construction of an ADA compliant ramp.

The temporary restrooms and hand-washing station will be replaced by more permanent facilities to arrive soon. Showers and laundry facilities will also be placed adjacent to People's Village.

These facilities will provide more comfort for residents while allowing them a sense of separation from the main shelter – an important distinction for service-resistant clients who may have difficulties spending time indoors or around the crowds within a dorm-style setting.

While many of these individuals have been chronically homeless for a period of years, we believe that the experience of living in safety at People's Village will help them envision a different way of living.

Residents have expressed excitement and gratitude for the project. "I feel that I now have a voice," says resident Janine Noretto, "and that I am more positive about getting personal help and getting permanent housing. Stacie makes everything reachable." You can read more about resident Ron Potter's experience at People's Village on the next page.

**I feel that I now have a voice, and that I am more positive about getting personal help and getting permanent housing.**

So far, we have welcomed nine new residents to People's Village and will welcome the final 16 as soon as those units are completed. An interdisciplinary team including the City of Petaluma, COTS, Downtown Streets Team, Petaluma Health Center, SAFE Team, and other local providers coordinate weekly and

## Resident Spotlight: Ron Potter

Ron Potter was 11 when his stepfather died. "He was my best friend in the world," Ron says. "That's what started it all, I think." He never knew his biological father, but he considered his stepfather as real as it got. "When my dad passed away, I gave up on everything. I hated God, I hated everybody, I didn't care. I was on a mission to die, and die before he did, at 36. I was hoping maybe I'd get shot or killed. I tried it a couple times myself. I guess it's just not my time to go."

At 65, Ron has been in and out of homelessness most of his life. "I've been on my own since I was 13," he says. "I've been through so much, so many programs. My oldest sister and oldest brother passed away, all from overdoses." He's also struggled with substance abuse himself.

He was staying at Steamer Landing last fall when he met COTS' Stacie Questoni, who is now the People's Village Services Manager. Stacie brought Ron, along with many of his neighbors, to the Temporary Placement Center designed to serve unsheltered adults through the winter before People's Village opened to residents. At first, Ron says, "I wasn't gonna come [to People's Village], but I came down here, and [another resident] Brad's door was open, and Brad said, hey check out my room, and I could see, hey, you can walk around in here, and I go, I like that. And I said, I think I'm gonna reconsider, and if it's not too late, I'll check one out." Plus, he adds, "Stacie's the bomb."

Ron doesn't love all the rules and structure – the curfew, in particular,



has been difficult for him – but he's doing his best to pave the way for future residents. "I'm grateful for having the opportunity to do this, so I'm gonna do this right," he says. "I think everybody here is good people, and I'd do anything to support this place. I want the next people that come in to have the same opportunity we got. This is for them, so I'm going to make the best I can with it."





Brandy and Josh with former case manager Wendy Lindberg



## Brandy and Josh

“We’re going to the store in a little bit, baby,” Brandy says, patiently. She’s speaking to her daughter, Luna, who’s anxious to head out to the grocery store. “She’s gonna be four in June,” Brandy says. “She just started having conversations with us recently, like full on back and forth. One sentence doesn’t necessarily mean one topic,” she adds with a laugh.

Luna has always been Brandy and her husband Josh’s primary motivation for getting a place of their own. Before coming to COTS, the family was living with Josh’s father, a connection made when Brandy, Josh, and Josh’s father were staying at Catholic Charities. Josh’s father started receiving housing assistance, and he asked if they’d move in with him, but the situation was volatile from the start. “From what [Brandy] told me, [Josh’s dad] drank an awful lot,” says Wendy Lindberg, who was the family’s case manager

at the Kids First Family Shelter (KFFS). “It was a very abusive situation, and she didn’t feel safe, and didn’t want Luna in that situation.”

Six months after moving in with Josh’s father, things came to a head. “One day he just decided to get in my face over me putting the dishes away wrong,” Brandy says. “He’s not been a great man to my husband or his other kids, but that was the first time he ever decided to do something like that with me. [So] we left ‘cause we didn’t want our daughter to be around stuff like that anymore, and we didn’t wanna be going through it anymore; it just wasn’t healthy for anyone involved.”

Fortunately, Brandy’s uncle and aunt were able to take Luna while Brandy and Josh stayed in their car, figuring out next steps. “That’s when we got ahold of COTS,” Brandy says.

From the moment they arrived, the couple worked hard to meet their goals of getting into permanent housing. Josh was a few months into a plumbing job, and was often busy with work, so Brandy primarily met with Wendy for case management. They worked on daycare and head-start applications for Luna, which both had long wait lists; Brandy, who was unemployed, got a job at Staples within the first two weeks of their stay.

Eileen Morris, Client Enrichment Manager, assisted the couple with credit repair, helping to eliminate an outstanding Verizon bill from Josh’s credit history, and building Brandy’s credit up with a prepaid, low-limit credit card. “As far as financial help, I didn’t help them a whole lot, because they really didn’t need it,” says Wendy. “I tried to do a few things for them, but they really wanted to do it on their own.” The couple was spending

too much on eating out, so Wendy worked with them on budgeting, and making meals at home. “They probably didn’t have a lot of that from their background, cooking, so that was hard for them to learn how to do,” Wendy says.

During their stay, Brandy began struggling with her job, stating that she felt she wasn’t given enough training for the work she was being assigned. “She was becoming extremely stressed and anxious, at the job and when she got home,” says Wendy. “We discussed options, and she decided to stick it out and to ask for help from Josh, who was very supportive. I also let her know that Luna could come and play with me if she needed some time for herself on her days off.”



“Wendy, she was just amazing,” says Brandy. “She was a friendly face every time, just always asking how we were doing, she totally helped us out. This was a really hard time in our lives, and it helped us out immensely, I couldn’t honestly be more grateful.”

Brandy told Wendy they were considering getting an apartment with Josh’s brother and his fiancé (now wife), which Wendy encouraged them to do. They began applying to places on their own, and just over six months after moving into KFFS, the family found a cozy two-bedroom condo in Santa Rosa to share. “We moved into our new place on New Year’s Day,” says Brandy. “It was a pretty neat way to start the year.”

Brandy and Josh are teaching her that it’s okay to be upset and helping her express her feelings and her needs in a productive way. And Brandy and Josh have a loving, supportive place to come home to after work, with a door to close and lock behind them.

“My husband and his family have struggled with homelessness on and off since they were kids,” Brandy says. “I think this is the first

“That steppingstone that COTS gave us was really, really great, and everything is for the better for it. We finally got ourselves to a point where we can build from, so it’s just up from here.”

During their time at KFFS, Josh had gotten a \$500 hiring bonus for getting his brother a job, Brandy had been offered full-time with benefits, and between their stimulus checks and Josh’s work bonuses and raises, the couple had been able to save \$7000 for their move-in expenses. “They were sober when they came in, probably for at least a few months,” says Wendy, “and they stayed sober, which was amazing; the situation of being homeless is stressful.”

And now? “It’s going well, everything is a lot better,” Brandy says of their new living situation. There’s a park across the street from their complex that Luna loves to play in, and a kitchen for Josh to make grilled cheese sandwiches and sliced apples when Luna gets hangry. They have a dog, Freya, and Luna can watch Mickey and Scooby Doo in their living room.

place his youngest brother has had to live in maybe four years, so it’s good for all of us. We’re finally in a stable spot, and it’s so good just to be able to look back and say, ‘shit I made it.’” Then she added with a laugh, “I didn’t mean to swear, my bad!”

“Everything is on a better track than I ever thought I’d be able to get myself to,” she says. “That steppingstone that COTS gave us was really, really great, and everything is for the better for it. We finally got ourselves to a point where we can build from, so it’s just up from here. We’re just so appreciative of the opportunities COTS gave us.”





Cathleen Higgins, Chief Personnel Officer (left) and Jamieson Bunn, Chief Development & Communications Officer (right), marching in the Butter & Eggs Day Parade



Engagement Specialist Diana Morales (left) with Data Manager Shannon Wiseman (right) at the Human Race

# Hello Spring Events, We Missed You!

This spring, we saw the return of in-person community events for COTS and we were thrilled to be a part of the action. We had the incredible opportunity to participate in Petaluma Wiffleball, Butter and Egg Days, and CVNL's Human Race and we are so glad we did!

In April, area Rotary Clubs and Miracle League North Bay hosted their first-ever Wiffleball Tournament. We were delighted to be a part of this community fundraising event that also served as an amazing team-building event for COTS. Shelter Services Manager, Chris Inclan, said "Having the opportunity to play in the wiffleball tournament with my co-workers was such a memorable experience. It gave me the opportunity to loosen up and get to know people on a different level through the conversation we wouldn't normally have. Playing together as a team helped build a greater sense of camaraderie with my colleagues. Can't wait until next year so we can do it again!" Thank you to Chris and Shari Ranney for sponsoring our team!

Up next was the return of Petaluma's Butter and Egg Days! The theme of "Community... the Heart of Petaluma" was a perfect fit for COTS. We walked in the parade, and for the first time, hosted a booth. Board President, Bill Gabbert said "Throughout the entire parade people were clapping and cheering and just totally supporting COTS and the work we do. It was very touching to see and feel how much people appreciate COTS." We loved connecting with past clients, current supporters, and potential volunteers. We weren't expecting the booth to serve as an outreach tool, but we were thrilled to hand out information about our services to those in need.

Then in May, COTS participated in CVNL's Human Race in Santa Rosa. Once again, we were grateful to be out in the community raising funds and awareness for our work and connecting with potential clients. Engagement Specialist, Diana Morales said, "What a great opportunity to talk to our community about the work we do and nothing but positive feedback about People's Village. I had clients

stop by to tell me how great their lives are. My spirit was invigorated!"

Next up, COTS is hosting a booth at Sonoma County Pride. We know statistically, LGBTQ+ individuals are more likely to experience homelessness, and we're excited for the opportunity to support the community and raise awareness for COTS. We hope you'll stop by to see us!

Come find us at Pride! The theme this year is *We Are Family*, and we couldn't think of anything better. As the SoCo Pride site says: "we struggle, we rise, but in the end, we are here for one another as family." Join us Saturday, June 4th in Santa Rosa's Courthouse Square from 12pm-5pm. We hope to see you there!

# Housing Innovations



Once America's Best, now the soon-to-be-site of The Studios at Montero. Photos courtesy of the City of Petaluma.



## The Studios at Montero

COTS is very excited to announce our participation in The Studios at Montero! Part of California's Project Homekey program, Montero will be a 60-unit single occupancy permanent supportive housing (PSH) project located at 5135 Montero Way in northeast Petaluma (formerly America's Best Value Inn Petaluma).

COTS will work in collaboration

with the City of Petaluma and Burbank Housing, providing wraparound services to all residents through a Program Manager, Services Coordinator, three caseworkers, and a Clinical Supervisor.

Upon its completion, the Studios at Montero will provide housing for nearly half of the 133 unsheltered individuals in Petaluma identified

through the 2020 Point in Time count, which aims to identify the number of homeless individuals across our County. It will be the largest Homekey-funded PSH project in Sonoma County. Petaluma officials aim to open the site by November.

Look for more information on this exciting project in the coming months!

## Introducing HomeFirst



For years, the Coordinated Entry System (CES) has been the system homeless individuals and families have used to find shelter, housing, and services in Sonoma County. On April 1, 2022, HomeFirst, a nonprofit based in Milpitas, assumed new management of CES, and we are hopeful that

the change will help streamline services for all our neighbors in need.

While HomeFirst is new to Sonoma County, they have been serving our unhoused neighbors in Santa Clara County for 42 years. HomeFirst will operate using a "No Wrong Door" (NWD) approach, meaning anyone in need of housing resources can be seamlessly connected to the full range of community-based options available through a single application process. This method

helps connect people quicker to the services they need, with fewer middle steps.

We are excited to welcome HomeFirst to Sonoma County, and to work with them to assist those experiencing homelessness. More information about how to access services through HomeFirst is available at [cots.org](https://cots.org), or you can contact them at [ce@homefirstscc.org](mailto:ce@homefirstscc.org) or 866.542.5480.



# Doubling Your Impact with Abhi Dubhashi



When asked about his family, Abhi explained that whenever he shares good news, like a promotion, with his mother, she'll often ask, "Did you thank God" and "Are you doing enough to share with people around you?"

Growing up in Goa, India, giving back to your community was a value instilled in Abhi at a young age. While he grew up in a family with privilege there was part of the population around him that was not so fortunate. Among other acts of service, his mother would often invite those in need over for lunch or dinner.

**“ It’s a matter of spending an extra five or 10 minutes. And if that five or 10 minutes can make such a huge difference to both the organization and the people you serve, then I think it’s time really well spent.**

That mindset of serving your community didn't change when he moved to the United States for grad school. After a brief stint in Dallas, Abhi looked to make a career move with a company improving the lives of others. That led him to his current role in Research and Development at Medtronic here in Sonoma County. Today he works on creating life-extending medical devices like stents and valves for those with heart disease.

But his passion for helping others didn't stop there. Since his move to Sonoma County in 2010, he has volunteered at several local non-profits. But during the pandemic, Abhi was moved to support COTS because of the great need in the North Bay for housing. "I remember being really hit deep inside within me, by the situation of lack of homes or

seeing people who didn't have a home to go to....I heard about COTS. And I had heard about your founders, Laure and Mary, and I was inspired by their vision.I thought, 'Okay, if I can't directly do any volunteer work, at least what I can do is make a small donation.'" After that first donation as he learned more about COTS' work, he joined the Monthly Giving Society.

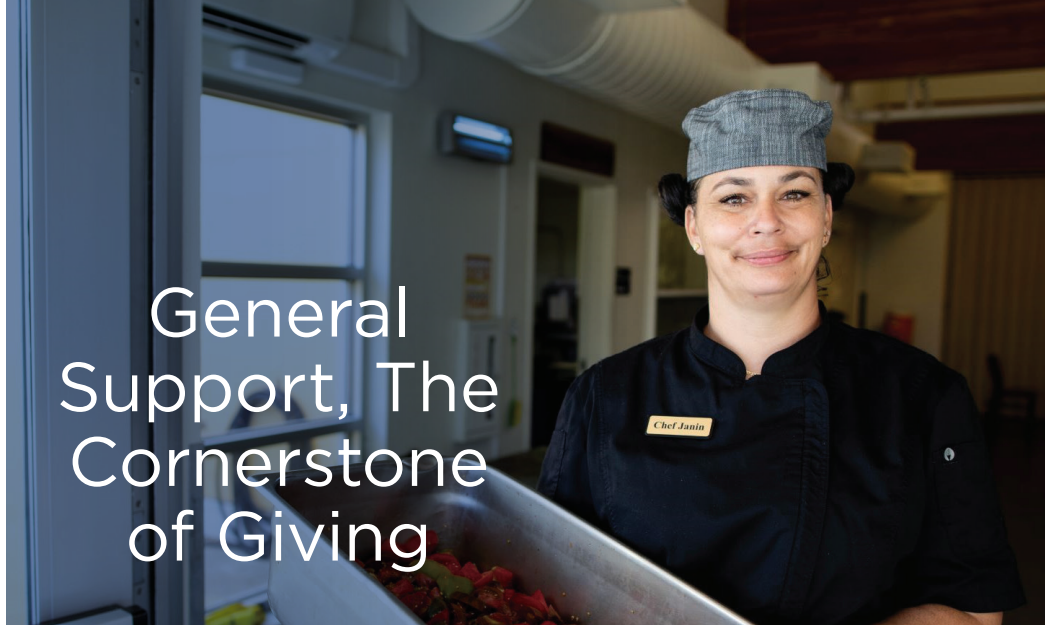
Leaning into the example that his mother set, Abhi knew he could make his gift go further. From his time at Texas Instruments, he knew some businesses will match an employee's private donations. So, he reached out to Medtronic to see if they would match his monthly gifts and they did!

Each month Abhi fills out a form to make sure his monthly gift is doubled. When asked about the process of getting his donation matched, he said, "It's a matter of spending an extra five or 10 minutes. And if that five or 10 minutes can make such a huge difference to both the organization and the people you serve, then I think it's time really well spent."

As the world continues to open up, Abhi is looking forward to getting more involved in COTS through attending events and volunteering. We know he'll be sharing with his mother about his support at COTS, and we are grateful for monthly supporters like Abhi who are committed to making their community a better place.



Many companies will match or multiply their employees' donations to COTS, even small or local businesses. Contact your Human Resources Department or Community Relations Department to see if your company offers this benefit!



What is general support? General support is a gift in support of COTS' mission rather than specific projects or programs. General support is a financial donation that provides for COTS' overall mission rather than a specific project or program. A gift to general support provides stability for our existing programs and allows us to stay agile when new opportunities are presented.

For example, if COTS receives a grant for Mary's Table that provides money to purchase food, we still need funds for staff to prepare the food and maintain our facilities. Without general support, Mary's Table would not be able to offer twice-daily meals to our clients and anyone in our community. That is where your support comes in to fill the gap. Our programs and services would not be possible without you.

Janin Harmon, COTS' Executive Chef, says: "The kitchen produces about 8,000 meals a month. With this kind of production, every person is critical, from facilities keeping our equipment running to my Lead Cook assisting me in producing nutritional seasonal meals. My Prep Cook is slicing

and dicing and assisting the utility worker in keeping this kitchen up to health code standards. This cannot be done without all the participants working together like a well-oiled machine. I am so grateful for the wonderful staff I work with."

Our world is rapidly changing, and new opportunities can arise at a moment's notice. To succeed, organizations need to be creative and able to pivot from original plans. General support fosters innovation and enables COTS to jump on a new opportunity to serve the unsheltered or respond quickly to an emergency affecting our community. Because of general support, COTS was able to say yes to exciting projects like People's Village and Project Homekey. Thank you for the support that allows us that flexibility!

We know that these gifts require trust in our mission and leadership. We are so grateful we have your confidence to use resources wisely and efficiently.

To donate please visit [cots.org/give](https://cots.org/give) or use the enclosed envelope.

## ways to give



**ONLINE, CASH, OR CHECK**



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To learn more about giving to COTS, visit [cots.org/ways-to-give](https://cots.org/ways-to-give), or contact Jamieson Bunn, Chief Development Officer, at [jbunn@cots.org](mailto:jbunn@cots.org) or (707) 789-6380.

