

PO Box 2744 Petaluma CA 94953

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

- William Wordswort

Help us Celebrate the Holidays at COTS

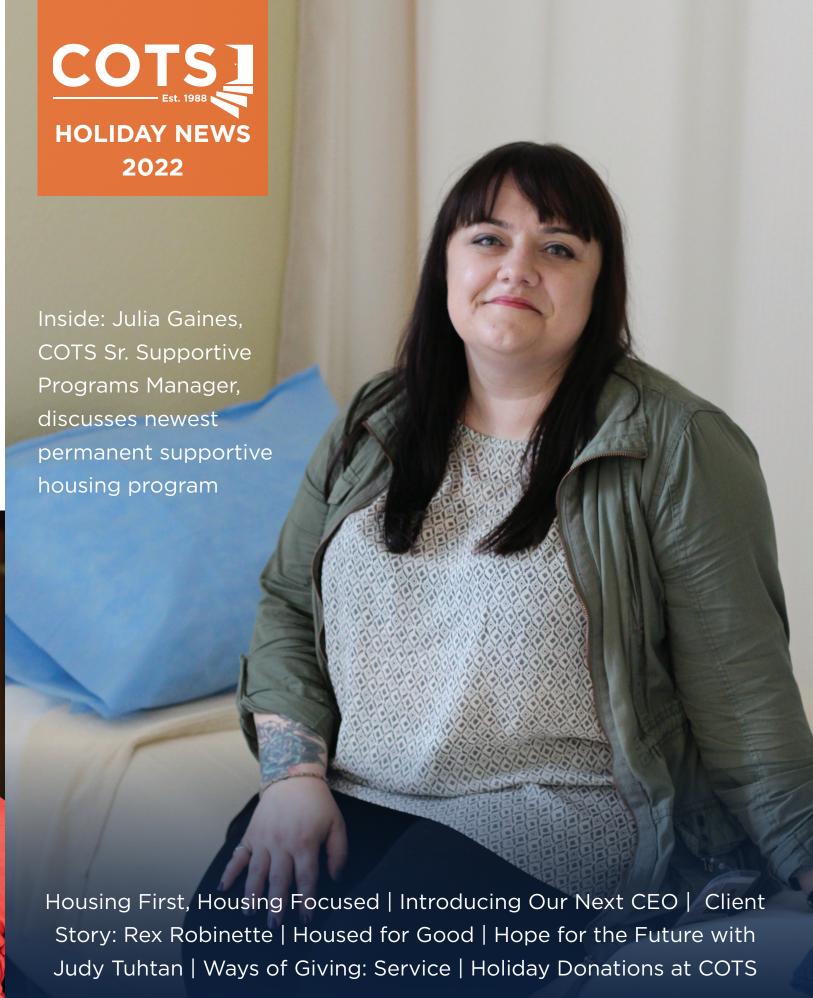
Now more than ever, COTS needs your help making this season merry and bright for our neighbors experiencing homelessness.

For a list of ways to give back, including donating items to our kitchen, providing gifts for our clients, volunteering during the holidays, and providing financial support, visit cots.org/ways-to-give, or scan the QR code below:



Thank you for everything you do to ensure COTS is here when we are needed most. Your support means the world to our staff and clients. Happy holidays!







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Dear COTS Friends and Family,

With the holidays in full swing, my time at COTS is winding down. For me, this is a time of both reflection and much activity, as I remain busy working alongside our staff to implement several new initiatives to better serve those experiencing homelessness in our community.

In this issue of our newsletter, you will hear from Julia Gaines, Senior Supportive Programs Manager. She will take you inside the creation of supportive programs at the new Studios at Montero project, which will provide 60-units of Permanent Supportive Housing to chronically homeless adults and families starting in 2023. Julia is working with staff to identify new residents for this converted motel in Petaluma and connect them to necessary services designed to keep them housed long term.

You'll also read about COTS' new Housing First, Housing Focused model. It combines the best of the evidence-based Housing First philosophy with the realistic need for skillsbased training that enables our clients to thrive in permanent housing. This includes help learning about landlord/tenant relationships, interview skills, and jobs training. It also requires accountability from clients, increasing their self-sufficiency and fostering their independence over time. And it continues COTS' decades-long tradition of serving the whole person in their housing search. We are very excited about this shift and believe it will have huge impacts on our clients.

The last four years have given me the opportunity to meet many of you in person and many virtually, as we've found new ways of staying in touch during a global pandemic. I treasure your feedback during my time at COTS, your investments in our work, and most of all, your deep compassion for those we serve. I am grateful for this community, which has endlessly surprised and gladdened me by the ways you show up for our clients and our staff in times of deepest need.

In January, a new CEO will be leading COTS into the future, and I am looking forward to a new chapter of my own. Thank you for everything you have given to COTS during my time here. I wish you all a happy holiday season, and much joy, love, and community in the new year.

Sincerely yours

Housing First, Housing Focused

In homeless services circles, you often hear the phrase "Housing First." For those who aren't familiar with that term, it refers to both a law and a philosophy of homeless services that has seen great success in other parts of the country. Hoping to replicate that success in California. Governor Jerry Brown signed the "Homeless Coordinating and Finance Council," or SB 1380 into law in 2016, requiring that any organization that receives state funding to adopt a "housing first" model into their programs by July 1, 2019.

The law is based on evidence that clients are more likely to succeed at getting a job and staying healthy if they are stably housed first. Still, Housing First brings its own challenges here in northern California, where the housing market is so unforgiving. If we place someone experiencing homelessness in a home or apartment before they are ready to pay their rent and meet their obligations on time, an eviction could send them right back into homelessness.

At COTS, our staff have struggled with this paradox. We have put mountains of energy into providing services like resume-building, interview skills training, and more, so that clients can prepare for housing during their shelter stays. But these opportunities aren't mandatory in a Housing First shelter, which says staff can't create barriers (like required meeting or program attendance) for people on their way to housing.

So COTS' team came together to envision a different way forward. In Fall 2022, we are launching new initiatives to become **Housing Focused**

Housing Focused means asking clients to be more accountable for their housing search while also committing to the idea that housing should a part of every conversation between clients and staff, across the board. In this way, we honor what works about Housing First, but also takes the realities of our current housing market into account. If clients are likely to need time for a long housing search, then our staff can better use that time to coach clients on their goals and help them work towards things like increasing their income, improving their health, and understanding rental agreements. Then, when an apartment is available, our clients will be ready.



As Chuck Fernandez, CEO, says, "We are moving towards a Housing Focused shelter because there is no dignity or respect for those we service by constantly seeing them cycle through our shelter, year in and year out." He also points out that it's a bad return on investment for donors, grantmakers, and the whole community.

"We also know that to be successful in housing, we need to start their process immediately, while they are in shelter, versus waiting until they are housed," Chuck continues. "In my opinion, then it's too late. [Clients] need to know what to expect and what they need to do. That is where a Housing Focused shelter vs emergency shelter plays in. They also need to be accountable and responsible for their actions. By being an emergency shelter, all we do is enable our clients. And that serves no

A Housing Focused approach also requires us to invest more in programs like Client Enrichment, that offer résumé building skills, job interview training, legal aid, and other supportive services that help clients prepare to be good long-term tenants once they do find housing. Community members can help by volunteering or by donating to support our work this holiday season.

With our new Housing Focused approach, COTS staff can better support clients in getting housing and staying housed for the long-term. We look forward to reporting our outcomes to you in 2023.

We are always in need of volunteers to support our programs and other initiatives. If you are interested in helping our clients achieve stability, email Diana Morales, Engagement Specialist, at dmorales@cots.org



What makes you excited about working with COTS? What are you most looking forward to?

I have a sincere and deep interest in improving our community—one of our greatest needs is supporting those who need safe, affordable, and equitable access to housing and supportive services. I am honored to work alongside talented staff and community partners in addressing this important and evolving issue.

COTS has an incredible community reputation, an impressive mission, and an accomplished team. I am

Introducing next CEO

You previously worked at Nation's Finest. How will that experience inform your approach to the role of CEO at COTS?

My experience at Nation's Finest provided outstanding opportunities for professional growth. I worked with a diverse and talented group and learned a lot of valuable leadership lessons. These experiences helped me understand the importance of patience, curiosity, empathy, and humility.

My time at Nation's Finest helped me understand the importance of placing the needs of the workforce first—without a healthy and motivated team, the impact of the organization suffers, ultimately harming those we exist to serve.

Experience is a great teacher my time in this industry has taught me the true complexity of homelessness. Acknowledging this complexity, I understand that communities must work together to provide innovative, flexible, and equitable solutions.

I have always been passionate about serving my community....I believe we have an ethical duty to help one another achieve health, happiness, and self-sufficiency.

excited to be part of moving the mission forward, working with a fantastic team, and leveraging our reputation and partnerships in furthering our mission. I am also excited to be connected more deeply to the Sonoma County community.

What drew you to apply to COTS?

I am deeply passionate about COTS' mission, and I am committed to improving equitable access to shelter, supportive services, and other necessary supports for all people in Sonoma County.

Sonoma County has outstanding nonprofits and engaged public

officials working together to implement creative solutions in addressing homelessness. I am proud of my past work in this area, and very excited to lead an organization with a stellar reputation like COTS.

What are things you do in your spare time, just for fun?

Anything outdoors! I am an avid hiker and mountain biker—you can often find me on trails throughout Sonoma County. I also love spending time with my (four!) dogs, friends, and my family.

What does being a good leader mean to you?

To me, being a good leader means building a foundation of trust, creating a safe environment that encourages creativity and empathy, and consistently supporting and challenging team members to become their best selves.

What most interests you about homeless services? What drew you to this particular line of work?

I have always been passionate about serving my community. My time in the military demonstrated how much a team suffers when one team member falls behind. Communities are no different—I believe we have an ethical duty to help one another achieve health, happiness, and self-sufficiency.

Without a safe place to live, our neighbors are unable to effectively address other life obstacles. Eliminating housing as a barrier results in improved health outcomes for adults and children and allows individuals to access necessary services in their personal journey to health, happiness, and self-sufficiency.





Client Story: Rex Robinette

Rex Robinette was eleven years old when his sister Laura was born in 1965. "We shared a special relationship," Laura says, "because my mom allowed him to pick my name."

The eldest of the family, Rex was a model older brother to Laura and their brother Gary. Rex took Laura to the zoo, to the Cleveland Orchestra. "I have no negative memories of him. He was a positive, happy force," Laura says.

One family photo shows him, a handsome, clean-cut teenager, with his hands protectively on Laura's shoulders. In another, he stands proudly in his army uniform on the staircase of the family home in Cleveland, OH. On the advice of his father, a veteran himself, Rex joined the army before being drafted in the hopes of getting a better assignment. In 1971, he left Cleveland and his little sister for Vietnam. He was 18 years old.

For Rex and for Laura, nothing was ever the same again.

During his leaves over the years, Rex described being yelled at and spit at by protesters or people walking by. He told the family that in training at Ft. Bragg, officers told soldiers that if anyone threw a baby at them, not to catch it because the baby could be tied with explosives. By the time he came back from the service in '74, Laura remembers him being



glad to be home – at the time, he still seemed like the Rex she remembers. But soon, he started sleeping a lot, growing his hair long. Slowly, Rex started to change.

Then one day, three years after returning home from Vietnam, Rex disappeared.

Through family networks, Laura's parents found out that Rex and his girlfriend had left for California. They were living in their car and selling blood to get by. Rex's mother asked a friend to pass a message on: Call home. We love you. We're not angry. We just want to know you're ok. But Rex never called.

For nearly forty years, the family only heard rumors about Rex's whereabouts. Then, last December, Laura visited the graves of her parents with her grown son, Drew. Drew can remember the day clearly. He was visiting family in Ohio for Christmas. Standing in the cold at his grandparents' graves, Drew was overwhelmed with curiosity about his unknown uncle Rex. While Rex had left the family before Drew was born, he had grown up with stories about his mother's beloved big brother. Drew felt that people don't just fall off the face of the earth something must have happened to him. In that moment, in the northeast Ohio cold, he decided to find Rex.

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Drew didn't have any information besides his uncle's full name, but he started googling. By early February, he had found 16 or more phone numbers associated with Rex's name and several addresses. Drew called every apartment building and followed a variety of leads. But he still hadn't broached the subject of Rex with his mom. Finally, out of options, he asked Laura for Rex's social security number and date of birth. He told his mom he would either find Rex or hire an investigator.

With the new information, Drew found Rex's military record. He had earned a parachute badge and an expert infantryman badge. The record also showed that Rex had gone AWOL and was granted a general discharge – indicating that there was something that prevented Rex from performing his duties adequately. Drew suspects that he was told his unit was going to deploy, and he couldn't bring himself to do it.

Drew says, "It's almost funny to describe my search for him because I searched everywhere...I got On August 2nd, the investigator emailed them the report. For the last six months, all the evidence indicated that Rex was still alive. But that day, the investigator's report revealed that Rex had passed away that June – while Drew was actively searching for him



Drew was devastated. Even though he knew it was unlikely, Drew had been envisioning some level of closure for the family.

The investigator's report showed that Rex had passed away while living at Santa Rosa's Benton Village apartments for veterans. A previous

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frustrated to the point of tears." He says that finding his uncle became an almost obsessive pursuit. "I felt like I needed to find him."

Over the summer, Drew hired a private investigator to help complete the search. He and Laura grew more hopeful of finding Rex.

address showed that Rex had stayed at 900 Hopper Street in Petaluma – the address for COTS' Mary Isaak Center. Once more, Drew placed a call, this time to Robin Phoenix, Director of Shelter Services at COTS. He explained who he was, and Robin connected Drew to the team at Benton Village. There he learned that, because Rex died with no next

of kin, his belongings were still in his apartment, and his remains were waiting at the coroner's office for someone to claim.

Drew broke the news to his mom the next Sunday. She took it hard, and the glimmer of hope that she'd held on to for years was lost. But Laura knew that she could still bring Rex home, and possibly find out something about his life from his belongings. That day, they began planning their trip to California.

In September, Drew and Laura flew out to Sonoma County and visited both COTS and Benton Village.
They were able to speak with those who knew him in his final years, and shared stories about Rex's past that helped our staff understand him better, too.

Robin Phoenix knew Rex well during his time here. He was served by several members of our case management team and was popular around COTS' campus. "He had a wicked sense of humor, a kindness buried deep within," says Robin, "and his smile was absolutely contagious... Even though his heart at times was broken, he was so stoic, he was literally liked by all residents and guests. Everyone knew Rex and was drawn to him for one good reason or another."

Robin describes him as deeply wounded by his experience as a sniper in the service, with severe PTSD that left him with delusions and paranoia. "He cared about keeping our shelter clean and did without anyone asking him to do so," says Robin. "The difficulty was his refusing to get the support he needed to process the horrors he faced during his time in the service."

After a long shelter stay, Rex was finally able to move into Veterans



housing at Benton Village thanks to his case management team at COTS.
Once he was housed, Sarah Vetter, COTS' Sr. Housing Services Manager, still checked in with him and helped him remain housed. "We worked on a lot of things," Sarah says, "but mainly getting glasses, grocery shopping, picking up medications...and assisting him in understanding his cell phone. I took him to pay his rent every month as well." showed her that he was no longer the young man she had known growing up. Drew and Laura also found plenty of books, and Laura reminisced about how Rex had always been a reader. During his teenage years, she said, "If he wasn't at school, he was at the library."

Despite his housing success, Rex continued to isolate himself when he was sad or feeling unwell. "I learned that if I brought my dog, Sugar, he would come out regardless," says

Sarah. "He loved her more than anything. He liked to take her to the dog park with me on the way back from grocery shopping. He would also get McDonald's and of course, share it with her."

During their visit, Laura found his discharge papers among his possessions which helped Laura to understand what her brother had gone through during Vietnam. His after-visit summaries showed Rex suffered from had delusions and paranoid psychosis - a diagnosis that was painful for Laura to read but showed her that he was no longer the young man she had known growing up. Drew and Laura also found plenty of books, and Laura reminisced about how Rex had always been a said, "If he wasn't at school, he was at the library."

When Laura cleared out his closet, she sat among his belongings to try and feel his presence. Then she hugged his clothes to say goodbye. Later, she was able to sign for Rex's cremated remains. "I was able to allow him to leave the coroner's office with dignity."

Growing up, Laura and Rex shared memories together at a family property in West Virginia by the river. Laura and Drew spread his ashes there in October of this year, and the family hopes Rex is now at peace in a place he once called home.

With their long search now over, Drew and Laura expressed gratitude for people like Sarah, Robin and Gaby Baum of Benton Village who



were kind to Rex during the last three years of his life. Most of all, Drew hopes that anyone else reading this who might be looking for a lost family member takes this away: "You can find them. It's possible."

Veterans Services at COTS

At COTS, we are dedicated to serving those who have served, providing services, shelter, and housing, as well as working with industry partners to get veterans experiencing homelessness what they need. Our Integrity Housing (IH) program collaborates with Nations Finest (formerly Veterans Resource Center). COTS places Nations Finest clients in IH when we have vacancies. "The beauty of that partnership," says Debbie Robbins, IH Housing Case Manager, "is the new (Vet) client has ALL of the resources available to them from COTS AND Nations Finest that can really help in a successful transition and housing stability."



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Housed for Good: COTS' New Permanent Housing Project

By Julia Gaines, COTS Sr. Supportive Programs Manager

'The solution to homelessness is housing.' It's a simple and logical conclusion to draw, and it's the central belief of the 'Housing First' model widely adopted by HUD and service providers as the country's answer to the homelessness epidemic. However, a roof over someone's head—as crucial a step as it is—represents only one part of a multifaceted approach to aid the unsheltered.

These ideas of providing services and creating a sense of community are the collective focus of COTS and the Burbank Housing Development Corporation, partners in a new housing project slated to house 60 of the county's unsheltered individuals and families: the Studios at Montero. A stone's throw from Highway 101 off the Redwood Highway exit, the site of the Studios at Montero (fondly

A roof over someone's head—as crucial a step as it is—represents only one part of a multifaceted approach to aid the unsheltered.

To set up an individual for success in housing, our experience tells us that supportive services are necessary from the very beginning of their housing journey to address the issues that caused them to become and remain unhoused. Another part is an inclusive, safe community of their peers to support them in the oftenjarring transition from homeless to housed, and to keep them motivated with a sense of purpose and belonging.

called 'SAM' by its developers and future staff) has been home to a budget motel that has exchanged hands many times throughout the years. But thanks to a grant from the state's Project Homekey, which awarded Burbank just over \$15 million in March, this two-story structure will be remodeled into single occupancy studio apartments for the county's most vulnerable chronically homeless and disabled residents.

The Studios at Montero will be a Permanent Supportive Housing (PSH) program, meaning it's a permanent residence paired with intensive supportive services. PSH units are designed to have a "no wrong door" approach—tenants will not be turned away for past criminal convictions or evictions, or current issues with mental health or substance use. Once housed, COTS onsite case managers address issues that may jeopardize their housing stability, such as disruptive behaviors or physical challenges performing self-care and daily household tasks.

"The model helps people to stay housed, get healthy, and build skills they need to live independently," says Ashlyn Artis, the PSH Manager for Burbank Housing. "Not only does PSH benefit the individuals served, it is a cost-effective solution. It works to lower public costs associated with the use of crisis services such as shelters. hospitals, jails and prisons."

Although its opening is scheduled for Spring 2023, Mark Krug, COTS Board member and the Special Projects Manager for Burbank Housing, says the Studios at Montero is already

structured for success because of a number of attributes. "Five COTS Supportive Services Staff will be onsite dedicated solely to the tenants, 24/7 in-person monitoring to assure the safety of residents and the premises, and sliding-scale rental assistance for all tenants so their income, or lack of income, is not a barrier to safe and secure housing." says Krug. "Also, the property budget is adequate in all areas to ensure (the Studios at Montero) is well-maintained and safe and comfortable for residents for the long haul."

If the results of the recent Sonoma County Point-In-Time (PIT) Count taught us anything, it's that we need to reconsider the one-size-fitsall approach and instead be open to a variety of ways to serve the unsheltered, starting with giving the unsheltered a voice in where they are housed. COTS case management considers the tenant's individual needs, strengths and expressed preferences when drafting their 'Housing Support Plan', designed to build upon life skills, create selfsufficiency, and identify potential barriers to housing retention, such as hoarding, PTSD or substance abuse.

COTS is enlisting the help of the tenants themselves to make SAM a welcoming community. SAM tenants will have the opportunity to join a resident advisory board that meets with representatives from other COTS PSH programs to discuss tenant issues. Also, SAM tenants can take on a leadership role as a tenant peer mentor for the 'SAM Squad', a new program designed by COTS to leverage the power of shared life experiences to maintain friendly neighbor relations and facilitate engagement in community activities.

"Residents take care of their community when they have a sense of ownership and pride," says SAM case manager Barry Peelen, who is currently assisting prospective SAM tenants with their housing applications. "I'm seeing a lot of excitement among the folks applying for this housing program. They can't wait to land somewhere, stop struggling, and just start a new life."

Realizing that SAM cannot be a success without strong collaboration with Sonoma County service providers, tenants will also be connected to care at Petaluma

Health Center, which is less than one mile away, and COTS will arrange transportation to its Mary Isaak Center and nearby Petaluma Peer Recovery Center for tenants to attend weekly mental health, life skills and recovery groups.

"The thoughtfulness and deep expertise COTS has exhibited in the planning process has provided Burbank Housing nothing but confidence and conviction about Montero's future success," says Krug. "Burbank Housing believes these projects provide the permanent solutions necessary to reduce-and eventually end-regional homelessness. With COTS as a partner. Burbank feels the Studios at Montero can be a flagship property in this effort."

COTS and Burbank Housing will hold a virtual presentation and Q&A about the Studios at Montero development on **December 14** at 12pm PST. An announcement with the meeting link will be emailed to the community about one week beforehand. Join your neighbors and learn more about ending homelessness in Petaluma!

Benefits of SAM Living

- The tenant's rent portion is between 30% and 40% of the tenant's income (min. \$50/month), household utilities included
- Rental Assistance is provided by the Sonoma County Housing Authority in the form of a Project-Based Voucher (PBV). After a one-year residency at SAM, tenants are eligible to request a Housing Choice Voucher (HCV) from the Housing Authority, which can be used to move into independent, permanent housing
- Financial assistance programs available for security deposit
- Group activities onsite and off, and leadership opportunities with the PSH Resident Advisory Board or the 'SAM Squad' tenant peer mentor program
- 24/7 staff on property



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Hope for the Future with Judy Tuhtan



We sat down with former Board President, Judy Tuhtan on her passion and dreams for COTS and to hear why supporting COTS just may be the best investment you make.

Judy Tuhtan has always had a passion for helping others. Whether it was taking

care of younger siblings, volunteering at her children's schools, or in the community, Judy loves to serve. She first got involved with COTS when the Family Connection merged with COTS. She then served on the COTS Board of Directors from 2005 - 2021. During her tenure, past CEO, John Records, told her, if she was on the board she had to live and breathe COTS. And that's what Judy aspired to do.

COTS is the number one charity; your money really goes to helping people in their daily lives. To me, there is no waste. Your investment really does work.

Since joining the board, Judy has been a champion of COTS' successes. She held various board positions, including president of the board for four years. Judy and her husband, Michael, often hosted COTS Conversations with community members, where they could hear firsthand about the work at COTS. She helped organize fundraisers, invested in learning about every aspect of COTS programming, and attended training seminars to be a more educated and effective board member.

Even now, as she has retired from board life. Judy is still actively involved in COTS. She takes time to meet with staff, attends COTS events, and continues to promote our work. So, why does she still work so hard to promote COTS? Because her dreams for COTS are coming true.

When asked about her hopes for COTS' future, she said my hopes are coming true, my dreams are coming true. My hope has always been that we do some kind of tiny home. I'm so impressed with them [People's Village]." After spending time with Randy Clay and our outreach team, she saw the importance of wrap-around services and is so glad People's Village is onsite and clients are receiving case management.

Judy's other dream "was that we take a motel and convert it and we're doing it." She is thrilled about the opening of Studios at Montero, its 60 units of Permanent Supportive Housing, and the

> positive impact it will have on our community. She noted with the cost of building in Sonoma County, that creative projects like Studios at Montero are so important.

So, with her dreams coming true, what else does she hope for? "[For

COTS] to continue to think outside the box. To keep being dreamers." She's excited about the current staff, their expertise, and their creativity. With all that's happening, she hopes people will continue to invest in the work at COTS so that we can continue to dream big. "COTS is the number one charity; your money really goes to helping people in their daily lives. To me, there is no waste. Your investment really does work."

We are so grateful for Judy's support and for the support of all our donors who make our work possible. We hope you'll consider investing in our work today.



"Small acts, when multiplied by millions of people, can transform the world." Howard Zinn, At COTS, our volunteers and their acts of service are transforming our community. Our volunteers play a crucial role in the success of our programs and are invaluable resources. Their gift of service goes farther than the hours they serve.

Our volunteers save COTS money. Thanks to our volunteers in the kitchen and jobs program, our staff can serve more clients and have built new partnerships with other community organizations. In the past year, volunteers in our Red Tape Club gave nearly 200 hours of their time and expertise to assist clients in iob searches, housing searches, interview skills, and more. Thanks to kitchen volunteers, our staff have more time to plan meals and expand partnerships. Mary's Table now provides food and meals to

organizations like Pep Housing, SAY, and St. Vincent's

Volunteers are often our best advocates. A volunteer's personal experience with our clients helps them see the human reality of those experiencing homelessness and not just the stereotypes. They become effective ambassadors and informed voices in the community. Our volunteers are also often our biggest champions during our fundraisers, sometimes even organizing fundraisers and supply drives themselves. Their service raises awareness of COTS in our community and helps



raise funds vital to our programs' success.

Volunteers bring a diversity of skills to our organization. Our volunteer board of directors comes from a variety of backgrounds including healthcare. finance, law, and housing. They bring unique skill sets that provide guidance, education, and support. They advise senior leadership on best practices and help COTS to be our best.

We are so grateful for all our volunteers, and for the ways in which you support our clients and our cause. We would not be the organization we are without your support. If you are interested in serving as a volunteer at COTS, please email dmorales@cots.org.

Holiday Donations at COTS

This holiday season, COTS needs our community more than ever! Help us spread joy with your donations of kitchen items, arts & crafts supplies, holiday gifts, and more for our clients experiencing homelessness. Find out how to give back for the holidays at cots.org/ holidays, or by scanning the QR code to the right.



ways to







LEAVE A LEGACY



Church.





To learn more about giving to COTS, visit cots.org/ways-to-give, or contact Erin Krueger, Development Manager, at ekrueger@cots.org or 707.765.6530 x126