



COTS
Est. 1988

SUMMER NEWS

2023



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A Note From Chris

Dear COTS Friends and Family,

We are off to an amazing start in 2023, growing our programs to meet the needs of our community, and ensuring our COTS team is excelling in all we do. As we enter Fiscal Year 2024, COTS is set to continue our growth trajectory and is excited to serve more people than ever.

COTS recognizes that a lack of housing availability in Sonoma County is a large contributing factor to homelessness—that is why, in FY24, COTS is expanding its permanent supportive housing program to include an additional 14 units of permanent supportive housing in Santa Rosa, CA. These 14 additional units will provide safety, warmth, and a place to call home for 14 chronically homeless community members in Sonoma County. COTS is proud to expand this program, and thankful for the community's support of this expansion.

COTS is also expanding its Recuperative Care program in FY24. This program, which provides housing and supportive services for unsheltered people exiting hospital care settings, will grow from six beds to 20 beds in 2024. The COTS Recuperative Care program partners with healthcare providers throughout the community, including both Providence and Kaiser hospital systems, as well as other community-based providers. We are excited to increase our ability to best serve the community, and we are humbled by the support of community members and providers who continue to support us through this successful transition.

COTS is dedicated to ending homelessness, and to ensuring everyone in our community has a place to call home. This type of program expansion and service to our community would not be possible without investments from supporters like you. From volunteer time to financial support—the COTS team is forever grateful for your partnership in all we do.

Until next time.

Chris Cabral



Meet the Board



We sat down with COTS Board Treasurer Stefanie Giani, CPA, Assurance Manager at BPM (Because People Matter) LLP, to find out more about her experience on the board. Stefanie has been serving since October 2021 and has been Board Treasurer since October 2022.

How did you find out about COTS?

I found out about COTS through BPM's community outreach program.

What made you want to sit on the board at COTS?

I had spent the past few years focused on developing in my career and tackling the CPA exams. Coming out of that, I really wanted to get more involved in the community. COTS stuck out to me given homelessness has glaringly become a bigger issue in Sonoma County while available resources have declined, and the cost of living continues to increase. I am also a big believer of the housing first philosophy. When I heard COTS was looking for a board member with strong finance and accounting skills, I felt compelled to support their mission in the way I know how.

What are you excited to bring to your work on the board that is uniquely you?

I am excited to bring the technical knowledge I have on the finance and accounting side as well as the

management, team building, and problem solving. My hope is that it benefits and supports COTS in expanding programs through both grants from individuals and corporations and federal grants as well as long-term financial stability so their work can continue for the generations to come. I am also excited to bring a fresh outlook to the Board.

Is there anything in your life in particular that drew you to homeless services/helping others?

I was drawn to helping others because I am passionate about community, both building it and giving back to it. I was drawn to homeless services because homelessness is becoming a bigger multifaceted issue in Sonoma County.

When was your official start date on the board?

I joined the Board in October 2021 and have served as Treasurer since October 2022.

During your time on the board (or prior to), have you spent any time volunteering, either with COTS or other organizations?

I have spent some time volunteering with other local organizations.

How has your time on the board affected you? What have you gotten out of it?

My time on the Board has brought me a deeper understanding of the phrase "it takes a village". It really does take a village to carry out the work of COTS from the mental support provided among staff, to the knowledge it takes maintain the accounting so COTS can continue to be successful. It's inspiring to see how this village comes together to carry out their mission.

How have you enjoyed the role of Board Treasurer so far?

I have enjoyed this role as I've learned a lot about the history of COTS during this time and continue to. Everyone I work and meet with is also great!

What has your experience of the board been as a whole?

My experience has been only positive. I realize I am new to serving as a Board member and am grateful for the support received from both other Board members and the COTS staff. I continue learning from staff about the programs and the success stories and other Board members who have served for much longer about the history of COTS.

Celebrating Our Team: Ashley Lovejoy

At COTS, we love to celebrate our teammates' successes. So when HUD-PSH (Permanent Supportive Housing) Care Manager Ashley Lovejoy got into her first choice nursing program, the whole team erupted in a series of congratulatory emails.

"I've always naturally been drawn to medicine," she says. In spite of this, the journey to nursing school has not been simple, or easy.

Sonoma State and got my Bachelor's in Sociology."

Last May, her journey brought her back to COTS, when she joined the team as our HUD-PSH Care Manager. **"I told everyone coming in that I wanted to work for COTS because of my history with COTS, and because I wanted to make a difference,"** she says.

Prior to working at COTS, Ashley's love of children had always drawn



For Ashley, **having the Petaluma Health Center on campus has been invaluable in helping her clients.**

While she doesn't know where she'll end up after nursing school, "I would love to go back and work with the Petaluma Health Center," she says. "My kids have always gone there, and I love the fact that they work with COTS."

Ashley's lived experience with homelessness gives her a valuable connection to her clients, one she hopes she'll be able to bring with her into her nursing practice. **"I can connect, and I'm able to build such trust with all of my clients now,"** she says. "I'm in a unique position where if I were to come back and work with this population, I feel like I'd be able to hopefully be someone that they felt they could trust. So that is kind of my long term goal."

When asked what her favorite thing about her job at COTS is, she said, **"I love the people. Every every one of our clients have such interesting and unique backgrounds.** I've got one that I've helped enroll in school, and he's back to school for the first time in like 45-50 years, and he's getting an Associate's Degree. I have another one that is going to go to school to become a minister, that's his passion. It's really amazing to see."

We are grateful to have Ashley on our team for the rest of her time leading up to nursing school, and when it's time, we wish her luck on her next adventure.

"I'm in a unique position where if I were to come back and work with this population, I feel like I'd be able to hopefully be someone that they felt they could trust."

"I grew up on and off homeless my whole life, like my whole childhood," she says. **"When I was in high school, my family actually lived in a COTS house. So that's how I knew about COTS, was my experience with them when I was young."**

"I had a great experience with COTS and the caseworkers. They were very encouraging of me, [even when] my mom was encouraging me to drop out of high school when I had a 4.0."

In spite of her mother's drug addiction, and with the support of her COTS case manager, Ashley finished high school. She then attempted Sonoma State, but dropped out after taking on too many advanced classes. She got married, then divorced, worked in England and Denmark, and is now a single mom of four boys.

After her divorce, she and her kids moved back to the States. "Within a couple of weeks of moving back here, I went back to school at the JC. And in a couple of years, I went back to

her to pediatrics. But her experience working with clients in the Permanent Supportive Housing program quickly changed all that. **"After working for COTS and then working with the clients that I have, building that relationship, I've decided I'm specializing in adult geriatrics now, because I see such a need,"** she says.

"I've seen with my clients, how fearful a lot of them are. [A lot of our clients are] very hesitant [to seek medical care] because they feel judged. I have one who, once he left the Mary Isaac Center, he refused to see a doctor. Any time he saw one, [he'd say] 'They don't care about me.'"

Not willing to give up, Ashley approached Nurse Annie Nicols, who gave her a personal recommendation for a nurse practitioner, and the client agreed to go. "Now he's been getting medical care for his chronic conditions because of that trust he has in her," Ashley says. "That's part of what motivated me to go back [to school for nursing]."



The Importance of Social Supports

In June of 2021, COTS introduced an exciting new program called Social Supports, and with it, a new staff member: Fionn Robertson, Social Supports Manager. The program serves residents in the Mary Isaak Center Emergency Shelter, Kids First Family Shelter, and Integrity Housing programs, and includes mental health and life skills trainings offered in both group and individual sessions.

“[Being] homeless has layers of co-disorders,” Fionn says. “There’s a lot of mental health, substance abuse, social disengagement, or feelings around having been or being homeless. **I provide that social support. I’m that person that they can bond to in a healthy way, that’s trustful, they can talk to.**”

A trained therapist (though he doesn’t practice at COTS), Fionn has extensive experience in therapeutic and social work, from being a Counselor and Case Manager at North Bay Regional, to serving an internship at TLC Child & Family Services in Sebastopol working with at-risk youth, to working for seven years at the Child Parent Institute (CPI) prior to coming to COTS.

Some of Fionn’s main offerings are groups, including nature walks, art,

qigong, and meditation. A lot of his work is about reducing stress, depersonalizing situations, and getting into your body and out of your head. The groups also provide safe spaces for people to just be, to connect, and to talk about

who is present and grounded in compassion,” he says. “The other person can sense this and start to trust and open up. Not because there is no longer lack of security, but because they feel that they are not alone.

“ We all need that person to complain to, to celebrate with. And a lot of people don’t have that, homeless or not.

whatever’s on their mind. **“A lot of people will say, I get out there and I feel normal,”** he says of the nature walks. “They’re just one other person out, doing something everyone else does; they’re not that homeless person on the corner.”

“I’m not an art therapist, but art in and of itself is another de-stressor,” he adds. “I’m just there coloring, and people will come and talk. **Those ways in which I can get people to relax, connect...I think once you start doing that, there’s that safety.**”

Fionn knows how important it is for his clients to have a safe space in which to process their feelings, thoughts, and experiences. **“I think it’s important for individuals facing homelessness to have an individual**

“We all need that person, to complain to, to celebrate with. And a lot of people don’t have that, homeless or not.”

What would he like to see more of? **“I think there needs to be more appreciation of the impact mental health has on people.** Just the stress of being homeless, that trauma...really, that is not an excuse. That really does affect how people communicate, how they can think complex thoughts and make decisions, how they can plan, their energy levels. Everything.”

We are grateful for Fionn’s compassionate care and attention, and for the valuable addition of Social Supports to our services offerings.



Client Story: Mary Machado

If you visit Mary Machado at Studios at Montero (SAM), you'll most likely be greeted first by a big brindle dog nose poking its way out the front door.

That would be Chance, Mary's dog, and though he may look big and scary, he's far from it. "People get scared of him because of his yellow eyes," Mary says. "They think that means he's a predator. But he's not scary at all."

looking at me like I am such a hero to him. **I said, 'Okay, I'll keep you warm and safe, and when you're older you'll do the same for me.'**"

As it turns out, Chance did come through for Mary, in a big way.

12 years ago, before she got Chance, Mary was assaulted by an ex-boyfriend, an act which almost killed her. "We were breaking up and I didn't know he took it that hard,"

"I remember when he finally got me, I thought I was dead. I wasn't getting away, I was losing consciousness, he had me by the throat. The only thing that saved me was he passed out. Thank God. I came to and he'd passed out. And I was alive.

"That moment has clarified every action since. I realized a few different things. One is my life is worth fighting for no matter what. And everybody else's life has equal importance. Nobody gets to do that ever again. The other thing was, **nobody can take my joy. Nobody. I'm gonna find every opportunity to laugh**, because otherwise, you're gonna kill yourself, or go around the bend."

“ I realized a few different things. One is my life is worth fighting for no matter what. And everybody else's life has equal importance.

"I rescued him when he was 10 weeks old, in the pouring rain," she explains. "I had an unfortunate winter where I was homeless in Guerneville, and he was out in front of the sheriff's office, on a black plastic bag, shivering. [I was living] underneath [Hwy] 116, bringing this puppy back with me. And he's just

she says. "I had never seen him drink before. And he was blackout drunk. I got close enough to smell alcohol and I was like I'm not doing this. I turned my back on him, and that's when he picked up the baseball bat." He hit her in the head, and then she hit her head on a piece of furniture. "He went from belligerent to incoherent; he was gonna kill me.

While the event clarified things for her, it also added to her list of existing physical disabilities. "[I got a] fractured skull, concussion, crushed larynx. I had no short-term memory for almost a year and a half. My depth perception was off for like six months. Every time I thought I was gonna get better, it got different. And then I started losing

time and waking up on my back in odd places.”

With no resources at her disposal, Mary had no idea what was happening to her. Fortunately, when he was four months old, Chance alerted her that something was wrong. **“He started sensing that I had seizures,”** she says.



Then a psychiatrist in Santa Rosa confirmed she was having seizures, and she was finally able to get treatment for them. “Thank God!” Mary says. “I was having grand mals and they hit me like a freight train. I didn’t know they were coming. TBI [traumatic brain injury] grand mals are different than epileptic grand mals. Sometimes I’d be out for hours.”

The assault not only severely affected her physically, it blew her entire life apart. “That was the event that got me houseless basically,” she says. “I lost my son because of it, I had a mental breakdown, it was really bad.

Had I had an attorney or a family member who maybe was there when I was at a really vulnerable point to say, this is what you need to do, [things might have been different.]”

While she had been close with her parents, her father died when she was 15, and at the time of the assault, her mother was in the end stages of

early onset Alzheimer’s. “I couldn’t go to her because she would have been scared to death and she wouldn’t have recognized me,” she explains.

With nowhere to go and no family to fall back on, she did the only thing she knew how: she started camping. “I was born and raised on a ranch in Northwest Santa Rosa,” she says. “I knew how to camp. So I got a tent, and I went up to Annadel, and when I left Petaluma that was the first place I went. I was there for a year and a half.

“If they took that away from me, I don’t know what I would have done. I just knew I couldn’t be in town around people. I couldn’t sleep in town. Where would you relax when you have that kind of PTSD? I needed to be away.”

three of them in one week. And then I had one where I wasn’t paying attention and Chance was trying to tell me to sit down, and I fell on a rock. I needed help. I started thinking about the Mary Isaak Center or heading north, and I was just too hurt. So I gave it a shot.”

Now, she has her own room, where she can lock the door, arrange flowers, decorate her walls and shelves, and, perhaps most importantly, have Chance. “He is my miracle,” she says fondly.

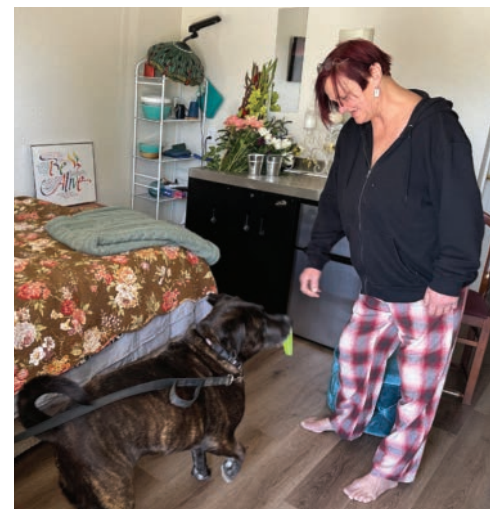
We are so grateful that Mary’s story has led her here, and that it isn’t over yet. Now she can recover from hip surgery in a place that is quiet and safe, rather than on the streets.

“I am so grateful to be here. The staff that works here are young and passionate, and they care. I’m grateful for that. No doubt. We should all have that.”

During the Glass Fire in 2020, Mary was evacuated to the Fairgrounds - her second time on fire evac while experiencing homelessness, after being forced to be evacuated in 2017 during the Tubbs Fire. Fortunately, she was connected with a housing navigator, who got her to the Mary Isaak Center for the emergency winter shelter.

Still, it wasn’t until last year that she came back and was able to connect with the team at SAM. “I was living on a hill and I twisted my knee,” she says, “and it was getting harder and harder to go up the hill. I had to walk a mile into town. Heat and exhaustion will bring on grand mals for me, and during that heat last summer I had

“I am so grateful to be here,” she says. “I made it to here, and I am super grateful. The staff that works here are young and passionate, and they care. I’m grateful for that. No doubt. We should all have that.”





McEvoy Ranch: Growing More Than Just Olives

“ Finding established reputable organizations like COTS to partner with where we know that our mission is aligned is natural for us.”

Founded by Nan McEvoy, McEvoy Ranch is a family-owned, 550-acre working farm in Petaluma. Over 30 years ago, Nan fell in love with the former dairy farm, and imported over 1000 olive seedlings from Italy, determined to produce the same quality olive oil in California.

Today McEvoy Ranch is known for their quality olive oils, culinary products, skincare, and their generosity. They consistently provide in-kind support for COTS, including olive oil and assorted bath products, but were looking to do more. In 2023, McEvoy Ranch began stocking a new product, a line of blankets from Sackcloth and Ashes. **For each blanket sold, Sackcloth and Ashes donates one to COTS.** This past holiday season, McEvoy Ranch bought blankets for its team members, over 60, which will provide a blanket for each of our residents at the Studios at Montero.

President Samantha Dorsey said of COTS: **“Philanthropy is a big part of the McEvoy family’s mission and**

envision in the in the Bay Area, so it’s really kind of a natural fit for the ranch that bears their name to also have a philanthropic side to our business. Finding established reputable organizations like COTS to partner with where we know that our mission is aligned is natural for us.”

We’re grateful to McEvoy Ranch for their partnership, and we are thrilled with how they are continuing to expand their support. **Next up, they will be volunteering in our kitchen, to learn about our sustainability practices and serve lunch.** Thank you McEvoy Ranch! To learn more about McEvoy Ranch, visit their website at mcevoyranch.com.

Did you know? We love having groups of volunteers come to COTS, especially our business partners!

LEARN MORE ABOUT CORPORATE VOLUNTEER OPPORTUNITIES

Contact Diana Morales at dmorales@cots.org.

ABOVE *One of the many stunning views at McEvoy Ranch, and McEvoy Ranch President Samantha Dorsey*



Sharing the Bounty

The community gardens at Studios at Montero (SAM) have come to be the pride and joy of the blossoming community, and as soon as you see them, it's easy to see why. Located directly outside the main offices, the gardens are composed of four huge wooden beds, now teeming with herbs and vegetables donated by local nonprofit Petaluma Bounty.

The gardens have grown a lot since Maria Whorowski, Petaluma Bounty's Education and Engagement Coordinator and Farmers' Market Ambassador Coordinator, last visited in early June. This time she's brought a composter so **residents can create their own compost for use in the garden.**

"There was already an existing relationship [between us and COTS]," says Maria. "And then we started talking to Julia about the startup of the gardens, and **it was a great opportunity to dive more into that and make sure you guys felt supported and had all the supplies you wanted to make it a beautiful space for the residents.**"

Launched in 2006, Petaluma Bounty was originally created to address the finding that many seniors, low-income families with young

children, and individuals in Petaluma were struggling to afford adequate nutrition. Now, it is a 4-acre community garden, with two low-income-accessible farm stands and so much more.

Petaluma Bounty is excited to continue their partnership with COTS, and the feeling is mutual. "I'm just so excited and grateful that Petaluma Bounty is interested in helping our folks have a community garden," says Julia Gaines, COTS Senior Supportive Programs Manager. **"I firmly believe that a sense of community and belonging is crucial in keeping our clients stably housed."**

When asked why being involved with the community gardens at SAM is so important to Petaluma Bounty, Maria said: "Empowering people to grow their own food...and **having this space where people are living and having community, where they can gather and have this collective project that they're working on; it's really cool to see.**"

We are so grateful to Petaluma Bounty for their amazing partnership and support, and we can't wait to see how this - and the gardens - continue to grow.

WANT TO HELP?

Looking for ways to contribute to SAM and other programs like it? **You can purchase items from our Amazon wishlist and have them shipped directly to our programs staff at COTS!** Visit cots.org/ways-to-give to find out how, or scan the QR code below:



ABOVE LEFT *The community gardens at SAM, less than one month apart*

ABOVE RIGHT *Julia Gaines, Diana Morales, Engagement Specialist, and Maria Whorowski check out the community garden at SAM*



The Power of Monthly Giving



John Brayton and Melanie Hildebrand know the power and importance of community firsthand. “We have a guy who works for us who was homeless,” says John. He had a truck that didn’t run, and he had severe health issues that prevented him from working a regular job. Fortunately, he met John’s nephew, Johnny, who took his truck out to his property and allowed him to sleep there while using his home during the day.

John is a Sonoma County native, and has always had a connection with helping his community. Growing up in Petaluma, his family ran Sonoma County Independent Living Skills (SCILS), a non-profit residential facility for adults with developmental disabilities that started in 1955 and only recently shut down. John still owns the buildings SCILS was housed in, and has since remodeled them into single-family residential rental units.

“John’s his own low-income landlord,” Melanie says with a smile. “I would say, you should really raise the rents, our taxes are going up, the insurance is going up. And he’s like, ‘You know, **\$50 more isn’t going to make a difference to me, but it makes a difference to them.**’”

John has also been involved with COTS since our inception, originally through his work with the Board of the local Boys and Girls Club. **“We went to some of the original meetings, and I was genuinely impressed by the mission.”** he says. But John also runs his own business, and he learned very quickly that trying to volunteer his time while doing so was quite taxing.

“If you volunteer to do stuff, and you try to run your business at the same time, there is a conflict,” he says. “I put a huge amount of time in with the Boys and Girls Club. And here I am trying to maintain my own business, and we’re moving and all that stuff was going on. It was easier to do a monthly donation.”

That’s why John and Melanie joined the COTS Monthly Giving Society. “I

learned a long time ago that it was easier for me to get the money than to volunteer to do things,” says Melanie. “For most people, they should consider [giving monthly], even if it’s a small amount, because they don’t really feel it. If it’s just a little, and it’s every month, and it’s an easy way to do it.”

We are grateful to Melanie and John and all our Monthly Giving Society members for their sustaining support of our programs and our clients. To join the Monthly Giving Society, visit give.cots.org/monthlygiving, or contact Erin Krueger, Director of Development, at ekrueger@cots.org or 707.765.6530 x126.

“For most people, they should consider [giving monthly], even if it’s a small amount, because they don’t really feel it. If it’s just a little, and it’s every month, and it’s an easy way to do it.”

“Turns out that he has some mechanical skills, and I work on old cars,” continues John. “So we started working together. And he also could do ranch work.”

When John had a rental property come up, they moved him into it right away, so he is no longer living in his truck. “Here’s one person who was homeless, and it took a village,” says Melanie. “So we get it.”

“That’s why we support you guys,” says John. **“You’re incrementally bringing people up to where they have some self-sufficiency and some pride and integration into the community.”**





In-Kind Giving: Empathy Unleashed

In-kind giving is a remarkable practice. It involves providing goods, services, or expertise to those in need, and it is a unique form of generosity that not only benefits those in need but **fosters a sense of community between our supporters and our clients.**

When you donate goods such as clothing, food, or other physical items, you help address an immediate and pressing need directly. **In-kind donations swiftly reach those in need, providing immediate relief and support.** The tangible nature of these contributions fosters a sense of hope and empowerment among our clients, showcasing the immediate impact of generosity and strengthening our community.

In-kind giving has an inherent power to forge connections and foster collaboration among diverse individuals and organizations. When our community members offer their time, skills, or resources, they often engage in meaningful interactions with our clients. This interaction cultivates relationships and understanding between individuals from different backgrounds. **Through collaboration, shared experiences, and the exchange of knowledge, in-kind giving builds bridges and creates a network of compassionate individuals working collectively towards a better future.**

“ [I] witnessed firsthand a disabled former MIC-ES/PV client who got housing but had nothing to bring with him....An in-kind donor who was flipping a house had furniture to donate [and it went to him]. [It] changed [our client's] life when we picked it up and delivered it to his new apartment. He could not stop blessing us all and thanking us repeatedly. He kept saying, 'I don't know what I would've done without COTS.' ”

—Robin Phoenix, Director of Shelter Services

When members of our community contribute their expertise or specific services, such as teaching, mentoring, or volunteering, they tap into their unique talents to make a difference. In-kind giving allows people to leverage their skills and passions in a purposeful manner. This summer, local musicians are providing live music to clients at MIC. **We hope you'll consider embracing this form of generosity to not only meet the needs of the most vulnerable in our community but also cultivate empathy, foster collaboration, and create lasting change.**

Ways to Give



ONLINE, CASH, OR CHECK



APPRECIATED SECURITIES & STOCKS



LEAVE A LEGACY



MONTHLY GIVING



MATCHING GIFTS

To learn more about giving to COTS, visit **cots.org/ways-to-give** (or scan below) or contact Erin Krueger, Director of Development, at **ekrueger@cots.org** or 707.765.6530 x126





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

- William Wordsworth

Join The COTS Monthly Giving Society!

This summer we celebrate the 3rd anniversary of the COTS Monthly Giving Society! **Join today at give.cots.org/monthlygiving (or scan the code below)** and be a part of a group of donors who exemplify a commitment to making lasting change in our community.

