



## Volunteers Unite to Aid Homeless

By Garik Hauer / Reporter

Published Wednesday, November 18, 2009



JARRICK GOLDHAMER / DAILY NEXUS

A volunteer assists a man in finding a pair of new shoes at Santa Barbara's fifth annual "Project Healthy Neighbors," which aims to prevent illness and death within the homeless population. Locals attending the event were offered counseling, haircuts and resources.

Over 20 local organizations hosted the fifth annual "Project Healthy Neighbors" fair this week, providing a wide variety of services for Santa Barbara's homeless community.

The three-day event, which is recognized as the largest mobile medical clinic in Southern California, was held at Casa Esperanza Homeless Center. Over 100 volunteers comprised of medical professionals, students and local residents worked with organizations such as Soles4Souls and UCSB Student Health Outreach to distribute aid to the local homeless population.

A broad array of services, such as drug and alcohol counseling, veterans' resources, dental hygiene and haircuts, were provided within Casa Esperanza's shelter and outside beneath four large tents.

According to Imelda Loza, associate executive director of Casa Esperanza, the goal of "Project Healthy Neighbors" is to prevent disease, illness and death within the homeless population. Loza said this objective is especially important considering that 26 homeless people have died in Santa Barbara within the last year.

Debbie Mills, who lives with her husband inside their van, was one of over 250 people who attended the fair on the first day. She said that for many homeless, county facilities that offer

similar treatments are out of reach because of the bus fare associated with visiting all the shelters.

“Keeping everything central is important,” Mills said. “Everything here is very systematic.”

Santa Barbara Neighborhood Clinics, one of the local organizations participating in the fair, offered reference booths for dental, medical and housing aid, as well as a rape and crisis center. The organization allowed individuals to set up appointments for services that would otherwise be unavailable to them.

Lisa Hashbarger, a first-time volunteer, said she was impressed with the amount of assistance provided throughout the three-day event.

“I’ve always been interested to see how it works,” Hashbarger said. “It’s very ambitious.”

Local resident Ken Saxon volunteered at the event for his fourth consecutive year with his son and daughter. Saxon worked with Families United to Nurture Dreams to hand out “survival packs,” which included backpacks filled with socks, shirts, ponchos, sweatshirts, hygienic supplies and food. At last year’s event, over 400 survival packs were distributed to the homeless. Ken Williams, coordinator for Project Healthy Neighbors, said the event is successful in providing extended aid and promoting health among the homeless.

“The key to why it’s so successful is if they come to get shots, they [also] get a survival pack with shoes and clothes,” Williams said.

Loza said the event has drawn some criticism because it may encourage out-of-town homeless people to move to Santa Barbara to benefit from the generous amount of services given. Loza, however, attributes the increase in homelessness — which included the addition of 17,000 members to Casa Esperanza last year alone — to the current financial crisis.