

Very dirty': Sunnyvale homeless shelter residents raise sanitation issues



by B. Sakura Cannestra

Can Jose Spotlight

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Homeless residents at the North County Shelter in Sunnyvale say a shift in management has heightened sanitation problems and workers are unequipped to handle older adults living there.

Two residents of the Santa Clara County-owned shelter told San José Spotlight there are numerous [unhygienic issues](#), including pests such as rats and scabies — in addition to problems with the bathrooms. County officials and shelter management said they're working to address the issues, but some people living at the shelter said the best option could be to close it entirely.

"It's a very dirty place," one resident, who asked not to be named for fear of retaliation, told San José Spotlight. "It should be shut down, not giving it to somebody else where it could be worse for the kids."

The 145-bed congregate shelter, which serves individuals, changed operators on July 1 from HomeFirst to the Bill Wilson Center, who will renovate it to house families by next year. The shelter stopped taking single adult referrals in April and has 49 residents remaining, many of whom are older adults.

Sources said one resident had scabies and was placed in quarantine in the same room as other residents, separated by only a folding screen wall. One resident said they recently visited a doctor because they've had hives, which they suspect is also scabies.

"I'm in a contaminated area, which means I'm contaminated," another resident, who asked for anonymity, told San José Spotlight. "You're literally abusing these elder people who need you to care for them, mentally and physically."

Shelter residents are required to eat outside at picnic tables, where large rats will run over from a nearby encampment and try to get their food. Both sources haven't seen a rat inside the shelter yet, but one said they've seen a rat at the entrance.

Daniel Gutierrez, chief program officer of behavioral health, shelter and residential programs for Bill Wilson Center, said he's heard some of these complaints. He said his organization is working on getting a pest control team to the location.

Gutierrez said only one resident had scabies and that they were quarantined away from others during treatment. He also said there was a lice outbreak before the transition from HomeFirst, but he didn't have information on that situation.

"There's some growing pains, like any transition that one has to take. Change is not always easy, but we've been doing a lot to improve the relationships with the current tenants to provide quality services," Gutierrez told San José Spotlight. "We're open to feedback and we're open to making adjustments based on the needs of clients."

One resident said the shelter's bathrooms don't have trash bins in the stalls, which poses problems for older adult residents who use diapers. While there is a trash bin by the bathroom light switch, the resident said not having bins in each stall makes it harder for those using mobility aids — so people leave used diapers on the floor.

Gutierrez said Bill Wilson Center recently bought trash bins for the bathroom stalls after complaints from residents.

Kathryn Kaminski, acting director of the Santa Clara County Office of Supportive Housing, has also heard this complaint and said she's aware Bill Wilson Center is working to address it. Kaminski said office representatives visit the shelter every day to support residents and workers.

Shelter employees also changed when HomeFirst left and Bill Wilson Center took over. Residents said the new workers are unprepared to interact with or handle the needs of unhoused people, especially older adults. They said workers talk to people living at the shelter in a demeaning “baby voice.”

“They do what’s convenient for them and not our best interests,” one resident told San José Spotlight.

Supervisor Otto Lee, whose district includes the North County Shelter, recently visited to talk with shelter residents and said he heard few complaints — and didn’t hear any allegations of mistreatment by employees.

“There’s some growing pains, but all in all, it seems like they’re trying,” Lee told San José Spotlight.

The Santa Clara County Board of Supervisors will discuss the transition on Aug. 13, Kaminski said.

Contact B. Sakura Cannestra at sakura@sanjosespotlight.com or [@SakuCannestra](https://twitter.com/SakuCannestra) on X, formerly known as Twitter.

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Newsom says San Jose should take urgent action on homeless camps



by **Vicente Vera**

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Gov. Gavin Newsom is calling on local governments such as San Jose to use state funds for urgent action to address “dangerous” homeless encampments.

Newsom’s [executive order](#) on Thursday suggests notifying [homeless residents](#) at least 48 hours before an incoming sweep. Locally, San Jose tends to give more notice, as officials want to enforce a scaled approach. First, the city offers resources and shelter repeatedly to homeless people living in camps. Those who refuse services will be swept and lastly, unhoused people can be [cited](#) or arrested. The city is in the process of clearing and finding housing for hundreds of [people living along its waterways](#).

The [executive order](#) comes weeks after a majority of the [U.S. Supreme Court ruled](#) cities can legally ban homeless residents from sleeping on public property — and it could be the start of Newsom’s push to appear tough on encampments as his name is floated for vice president.

“It sounds like Newsom is posturing for a role in the [potential Kamala Harris administration](#),” Todd Langton, executive director of homeless advocacy nonprofit Agape Silicon Valley, told San José Spotlight. “He knows he’s got baggage, so to speak, with California homelessness, crime and all of that. I believe he’s making this big declaration to appear more conservative.”

Thursday's executive order also said state agencies should make plans to clear homeless camps from state property. Newsom is directing agencies to model their sweeps after [Caltrans](#). California has cleared out more than 11,000 encampments since July 2021.

"The state has been hard at work to address this crisis on our streets," Newsom said. "There are simply no more excuses. It's time for everyone to do their part."

Caltrans spokesperson Edward Barrera said Newsom's executive order won't affect the transit agency's existing encampment removal operations, but hopes it will encourage more local agencies to ramp up their efforts.

"Caltrans is responsible for maintaining the state's transportation network, including protecting and maintaining the highway infrastructure, and understands that to solve the state's homelessness crisis, it takes state and local agencies working collaboratively to devise sustainable, equitable solutions," he told San José Spotlight.

Newsom's announcement makes no mention of permanent housing, though recommendations from advocates in groups like Santa Clara County's homelessness task force said [more permanent housing](#) is needed to truly address homelessness. For every one household in the county that is housed, [nearly two become homeless](#).

A [study cited](#) by the task force also showed the county spends more than \$500 million per year addressing homelessness.

In San Jose, Mayor Matt Mahan and councilmembers voted earlier this year to invest millions more in [Measure E funds](#) to tackle encampments along the creeks and provide emergency temporary housing. [A state audit](#) found between fiscal years 2020 and 2023 San Jose spent more than \$302 million on homeless support services — about \$88.6 million came from state funds.

But Newsom said local governments now have the necessary tools and authority to take on encampments in light of the Supreme Court ruling.