

Nonprofits partner to bring mobile showers, homeless services to Antioch

SHARE and White Pony Express will host weekly 'Oasis' events downtown



Octavio Perez, left, of Brentwood's Bold Barber, cuts Terry Huggins' hair on Tuesday, Sept. 29, 2020, behind the Community Outreach Center as part of the new Oasis Project, a joint effort of the White Pony Express and SHARE Community nonprofits to bring homeless services to the area. Included were hot showers, free haircuts, and giveaways of clothing, socks and personal care items. (Judith Prieve/Bay Area News Group)

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Terrance Adams sat quietly a distance from others as he awaited his turn for a hot shower Tuesday morning, raising his head only when his name was called to quickly take his place in line and not miss a moment of the 15 minutes he would be allotted.

Adams, an Antioch resident, was at the Community Outreach Center for the launch of Oasis, a joint nonprofit venture that brings a free weekly two-unit mobile shower and clothing and care closet to the city's homeless while local barbers and stylists offer free haircuts nearby.

"It does mean a lot to me," said Adams, who in previous times used a mobile shower down the street that has since relocated to another spot.

"They brought showers back to the community," he added as he accepted a volunteer's personal care bag of soap, shampoo, a toothbrush, toothpaste and lotion before scurrying into the newly opened pristine shower trailer.

At the outset, the showers and other services will be stationed at the Community Outreach Center and operate on Tuesdays between 10 a.m. and 2 p.m., but they could later move if needed elsewhere, organizers said. The Americans with

Disabilities Act-certified showers will be offered to all, no questions asked, they said.

The mobile showers were the brainchild of Ricka Davis-Sheard, co-founder of SHARE Community, who said she has long dreamed of operating such a service in East Contra Costa even if her nonprofit has only been around since 2019.

Although Showerhouse Ministries, another nonprofit, had been offering free showers, it went on hiatus during the coronavirus pandemic and only recently returned to a different temporary location at the riverfront downtown.

White Pony Express, a Central County nonprofit founded in 2013 by Dr. Carol Weyland Conner to help feed the needy, had previously owned the new shower trailer but never found any place to set it up. Then, White Pony volunteer Peter Brooks met Davis-Sheard and was immediately impressed by her desire to help others.

“Ricka was the light at the end of the tunnel of my long search,” Brooks said. “She saw the mobile shower as a perfect fit for the work SHARE wanted to do in East County. What she had in mind was exactly what White Pony Express had in mind.”

But Brooks also wanted to partner with SHARE and suggested an array of services be offered along with the showers each week, including White Pony Express’ Clothing and Care Closet, so guests can pick out some quality clothing, jackets, undergarments, shoes, socks and even books and games.

“My hope is that the whole experience, for people in the ‘desert’ of hard urban homelessness will be like travelers in the Sahara finding relief in an oasis,” he said.

On Tuesday's launch, Davis-Sheard said the nonprofit wanted to offer "revitalization to the unhoused community."

"We want to offer an opportunity for folks to get clean and to have some privacy," she said, noting for some it is the first time they can let their guard down in a private, safe place.

"It's more than just a shower that we are providing, we are providing the opportunity that folks may or may not have to feel safe and feel clean and rejuvenated," she said. "They will get some new clothes and a snack and can come inside the Community Outreach Center, which is a cooling center, to get away from the smoke and heat."

Kris Kepler of the nonprofit Lava Mae helped train SHARE volunteers in proper protocol for running a mobile shower program and how to clean and disinfect the units after each shower.

"Being able to take a shower not only increases their sense of dignity but it unlocks the opportunities that come with being clean," she told the dignitaries and neighbors who had come to get a first look at the new program. "And, being able to get a haircut and feel fabulous because you feel like a new person or to say I just got a new shirt and I am excited about this."

That was true for Terry Huggins, who said he felt like a "soldier" getting a full-service cut and trim from volunteer Octavio Perez of the Bold Barber, who said he was "big on volunteering" and would make sure he gave him the works just as he would any client.

Councilwoman Joy Motts, who has worked on homeless issues as part of a council task force, applauded the new program as a step in the right direction.

“The only way this will really work is we have the nonprofits and community working together to address this problem,” she said. “It’s a growing problem, and the city of Antioch is committed to taking this on.”

The new shower site is next to a motel where Motts hopes the city will be able to temporarily house homeless residents and provide services to get them back on their feet and into permanent housing.

“I think there’s really been an effort recently to address homelessness in East County,” she said, noting in the past there were few services available.

“This, of course, will be a big boon to us,” she added, referring to the new Oasis program. “There are so many of these organizations that are trying to help. When you are able to come together you are able to affect people’s lives dramatically.”

Kepler, meanwhile, spoke directly to those affected.

“To all of our unhoused neighbors and friends what we say is ‘we see you, we understand you, there’s hope and we’ll help you get through this.’ ”