Susan was ready to sleep on the floor. She was part of a program that helped her get into permanent supportive housing, but she wasn’t able to afford a bed or the delivery costs, and no program could pay for these items. Her case manager called Wings Homeless Advocacy and within 48 hours Susan had a bed, frame, and bedding delivered to her by the caring volunteers at Wings. Sadly, Susan’s situation is not unusual. Hundreds of people experiencing homelessness in Santa Cruz County get into housing each year but have no way to pay for basic needs like a bed, furniture, and cleaning and hygiene supplies. This crucial step out of homelessness is where Wings shines their light.
Moving out of homelessness isn’t an event – it’s a journey. Wings focuses on two critical steps in that journey: We help people overcome barriers to housing and we provide the newly housed with basic needs for health, hygiene, and dignity. Working with case managers from over a dozen support agencies in Santa Cruz County, we connect our volunteers with people experiencing homelessness to help them obtain the resources needed to become housed and self-sufficient. Our goal is to help house and stabilize the most vulnerable individuals to end chronic homelessness in our county. As our county tests different solutions for ending chronic homelessness, we hope our successes can be scalable and help other communities on their journey to solutions.

10 years ago, we saw a gap in the continuum of care. People were being housed but were often unable to afford the basic supplies necessary to remain stably housed. We identified where the needs were greatest and now train volunteer advocates to provide the following core services:

- Assistance obtaining vital documents necessary for housing and employment
- Providing move-in supplies, beds and bedding, essential furniture, and help moving in
- Transportation to important appointments such as medical visits or court dates

Wings has a well-organized structure designed to provide maximum support to our advocates, partners and participants. Our dispatchers coordinate task requests and assignments, providing flexibility for advocates to work within their schedules and comfort zones.

Our services are an essential part of the Wraparound Care Model, picking up where other agencies leave off. We work in a highly collaborative fashion with the agencies in our Continuum of Care, supporting them as well as our clients with our services. Many case managers are too busy to help a client obtain vital documents, so they refer people to us. Most supportive services do not have the capacity to give clients rides, so we make sure that the participant on Medicare gets to his pulmonary appointment and that client on probation gets to her court hearing to ensure health and housing stability. Such supportive services are crucial to making housing really work on a sustained basis. We are in it for the long haul, we don’t stop when a client gets the keys to their new home.
By keeping our focus on a few crucial needs that are not filled by other organizations or programs, we can concentrate on maximizing the quality of our services. We also adapt our services in response to participant’s needs. Giving rides was a highly utilized service when our agency began but the need for it has lessened over time as other community agencies have stepped in to fill some of the need. And so we pivoted to what people told us they needed more: assistance with obtaining vital documents. This is at the heart of our organization – adapting to better serve our community. We plan on offering our same core set of services throughout 2023, but our priorities will adapt as we get feedback from our participants and other stakeholders.

Many of our program participants are exiting long periods of homelessness. A study called “Home Not Found” by the Economic Roundtable in 2015 found that only 5% of the unhoused population accounted for almost 50% of the costs, and these top 5% were persistently homeless individuals. This is important because not only are chronically homeless people some of the most vulnerable and hardest to serve, but they are also the most costly subpopulation of people experiencing homelessness. This means that paying special attention to housing this group of people is both a moral and fiscal imperative, a necessary step to healing the individuals affected by homelessness and helping our communities thrive.

Hundreds of people each year depend on Wings for essential services and we are committed to growing our agency in a sustainable way. Volunteerism is at the core of who we are and what we do and we also recognize the need to support our amazing staff. We keep our operating costs low by utilizing partnerships with other agencies including our local library. We don’t have an office or meeting rooms – our volunteers meet clients where they are at, literally and figuratively, out in the community or at their homes. We plan to continue to grow our partnerships so that we can support more people on their journey out of homelessness. We are always seeking general operating support so we can stay nimble – community needs are not static but dynamic and evolving. We must be poised and ready to meet our community’s emergent needs.

**WHY OUR SERVICES MATTER**

- In the last two years, we helped 800+ people get their vital documents. Without documents such as an ID, birth certificate, or a social security card it’s difficult or impossible to get a job, get into housing, open a bank account and many other basic requirements of everyday life. Removing these barriers helps our participants get housed and become self-sufficient faster.
- We delivered 164 beds in 2021, including to family households with young children. Not only are beds important for basic dignity but chronic sleep insufficiency contributes to the development of cardiovascular disease and other related metabolic conditions, including obesity and type 2 diabetes*, all of which contribute to early mortality for people with a history of homelessness.

*Cardiopulmonary Physical Therapy Journal: Jan. 2020, Vol. 31, Iss. 1, p 5-10

**MISSION STATEMENT:**

Wings Homeless Advocacy is committed to living out our values of compassion, dignity and respect for all people by uniting our community to be volunteer advocates for those moving out of homelessness and onto a path of healing — working together to end chronic homelessness in Santa Cruz County.
If you’d like to know more about how we can partner together to help prevent and end homelessness in Santa Cruz County, feel free to email info@wingsadvocacy.org

Strengthen The Floor

Our services have a focus of “strengthening the floor” or reinforcing the economic safety net to decrease poverty and increase economic mobility. When people experiencing homelessness have access to our Vital Documents services, for instance, they have increased access to economic safety net programs (like CalFresh and Housing Vouchers) that promote not only economic stability but physical health as well. Living unsheltered is associated with chronic sleep deprivation which contributes to a host of serious health conditions. Lack of restful sleep also has adverse effects on mental health and memory* which can severely impact a person’s housing stability and job prospects. Obtaining vital documents gets our participants off the street sooner or helps them avoid homelessness altogether. This promotes increased physical and mental health outcomes and allows for greater economic stability, advancing wellness on multiple fronts.

Above: One of our dedicated volunteers getting ready to make a mattress delivery to newly housed clients.

Our Volunteer Model

Most of our program participants are referred by case managers to our Wings Dispatcher, who is managed by the Executive Director. If the request is for something within Wings’ purview, the Dispatcher connects with volunteers and sees who is available to meet the client’s need. Once a volunteer commits to a task, the dispatcher arranges the details with the case manager. This structure allows our volunteers to be flexible and work within their schedules without any long term commitments. It also takes the pressure off of our volunteers, since each task they receive comes to them fully vetted by the dispatcher or the Executive Director.