

Rubicon's Innovative Aid to Homeless Mentally Disabled

by Maureen Hartmann

The woman was doing poorly in life, to say the least. She was homeless, mentally ill, abusing various kinds of harmful substances including alcohol, and isolated from warm human contact. Besides that, her children were in the custody of another. Her main motivation in coming to Rubicon for help was to have her children back with her.

The first thing the Rubicon staff helped her do was gain admittance to a residential treatment program in Richmond. "She worked very hard in that treatment. She got her medications; she got clean; she got out, and she was placed in permanent housing," said Steven Grolnic-McClurg, director of supportive services at the Richmond office of Rubicon.

In her new housing situation, she had trouble and ran into new struggles. She began using again. She had problems keeping limits with homeless acquaintances who wanted to visit her or move in with her. She worked hard on her issues in case management and individual counseling, and they helped her locate the underlying problem.

Grolnic-McClurg said, "We finally identified that she needed to move away from Richmond to a place that was a little less urban, where there was less temptation."

Currently, she has maintained permanent housing for about a year in a more rural area of the county. She has regained custody of her children. And she is employed in Rubicon's transitional work program.

Grolnic-McClurg said, "I'm sure she will take that opportunity for transitional employment and turn that into permanent employment for herself. She's deeply dedicated to moving her life forward. She's been a real inspiration to everyone who's worked with her. The biggest piece was her dedication to have her kids back."

The main program that assisted this person's rehabilitation is the Western Contra Costa County Mental Health Services Act (WCCCMHSA). It was voted in by the citizens of California two years ago, as Proposition 63. In developing the MHSA in Western Contra Costa County, there was collaboration between Rubicon, as the lead agency, ANKA, Community Health for Asian Americans, Mental Health Consumer Concerns, Familias Unidas, and Shelter, Inc.

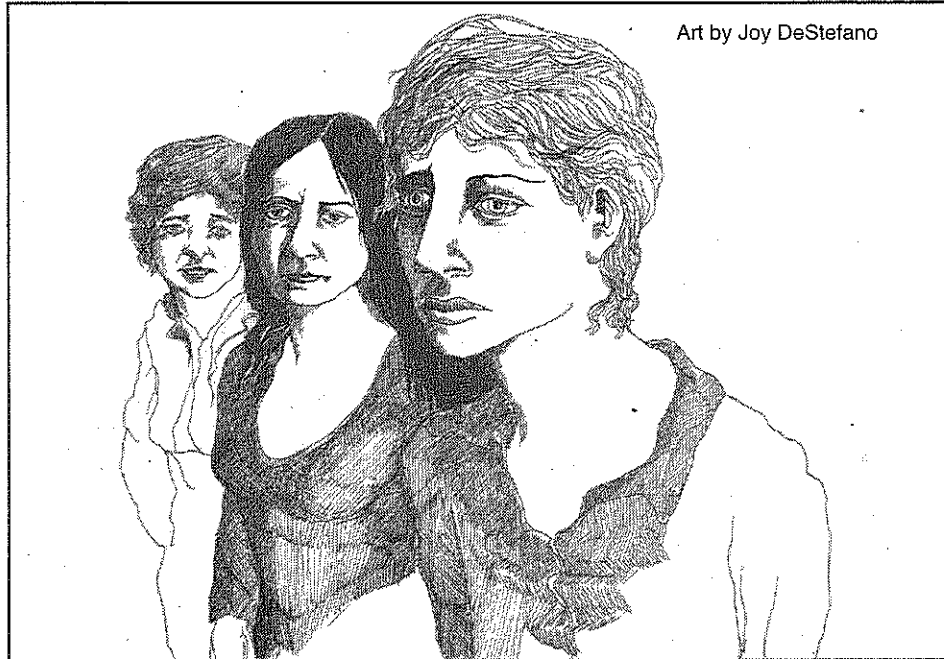
Rubicon provides the majority of the staff persons and manages the programs. ANKA is another program that provides mental health services and services for the homeless. "They're a little more focused in Central Costa County, and Rubicon is more focused in Western Contra Costa County," said Grolnic-McClurg.

Mental Health Consumer Concerns runs Wellness Recovery programs that anyone can attend, including those in the MHSA program. "The folks in our program use these services all the time," Grolnic-McClurg explained. "Also within these wellness centers, they run wellness recovery action plan groups that have been useful for our consumers."

Familias Unidas has been working with Spanish-speaking people. They have taken on 30 of the present clientele, those who are Spanish-speaking, and Rubicon chooses to let those staff work separately, because of the difference in language.

Finally, there is Shelter, Inc., which has a contract to master-lease all the housing units in the program.

Some clients of the MHSA in Western Contra Costa County attend the Day Treatment Program. The clients often think of it as partial hospitalization, because the program lasts all day, and is for folks who have just come out of the hospital, or want to prevent a period of hospitalization for themselves. The pro-



Art by Joy DeStefano

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gram helps in reduction of symptom levels by helping clients recognize what triggers their symptoms.

Grolnic-McClurg noted, "The Mental Health Services Act has really been a melding of agencies, and it's been a lot of work, but it's really paid off because we have created a stronger program than any one agency's been able to build."

One problem facing the program is not being able to take on prospective clients because they have no housing for them. All the housing spaces are taken up by previous clients. WCCCMHSA has worked with the County to slightly change the purpose of the program. It is now not for homeless people, but those who are housed, but are threatened with losing their housing due to issues with the landlord brought on by the mental health challenges of the clients.

At the moment, the program is taking on exclusively those people, because it cannot arrange housing for clients. Grolnic-McClurg said that one obstacle to taking in new folks is that many clients move slowly through the program. The staff tries not to kick a person out because he/she is not making progress, but tries to motivate the person to move forward.

Recently, the program has made policy changes aimed at a more humanitarian handling of client problems. One modification is "housing first." Clients are no longer put through stages of transitional housing on the way to permanent housing. They no longer go from the hospital to a group home, to supportive living in apartments, and finally to permanent housing.

Grolnic-McClurg said that research has shown that clients are more successful if they go directly to permanent housing, with a good amount of support. Many clients cannot obey the rules of transitional housing, are kicked out, and never make it to permanent housing. Clients want to live immediately in independent units in the community like everyone else.

Case managers can do all kinds of things for people who are moving into housing, such as helping them shop for furniture and setting up the apartment. Clients ask, "How do I set boundaries for people who want to move into my house?" Much time is spent in teaching living skills. Folks are in rap groups, Wellness Recovery groups, individual counseling, and twelve-step groups.

Grolnic-McClurg also said that an "evidence-based practice" called the "assertive case management model" has been around for "probably at least a decade." It involves a staff team approach in "case management" that is now called "personal service coordination" because "people don't like to

be cases that are managed." Every morning, the team of seven case managers, four from Rubicon, two from ANKA, and one from CHA, meet and briefly discuss all 95 persons in the program to make sure each person is getting exactly the amount of care that he/she needs and to keep him/her moving forward.

"It's been very effective," he said. "We're very excited about the results. People have had really good success in retaining their housing, and having their symptoms go way down. Folks are starting to move toward things like education and employment, reconnection with family, children, and other kinds of meaningful activities. It's been really impressive."

Mentally disabled persons who undergo multiple hospitalizations may have difficulty in maintaining housing. Even though the hospitalizations may be short, the patient must remember to pay the rent, and even get together the money while he/she is in an emotional crisis. The services of the WCCCMHSA can help with teaching money management and with financial support.

Another issue with the landlord of mentally disabled tenants is people moving into the client's housing. The landlord is upset because strangers are causing damage to the property. Also, "sometimes people's symptoms are really high. They're acting in ways that cause neighbors to complain,"

said Grolnic-McClurg.

Funding comes mainly through Contra Costa County from the State as the result of Proposition 63, passed by state voters.

Grolnic McClurg noted, "It is inconceivable, with all the cuts in mental health, what our mental health system would look like without the MHSA dollars in programs. We're all very grateful."

Last year, in the state budget battles, an attempt to take money away from the program was defeated. "There's not as much money in the program as there was a couple of years ago," he said. "Some years will be better than other years. Before the MHSA, many people thought there were not services that could help these individuals, and now there are, and folks are really moving forward with their lives."

"We're always afraid for individuals who have the least voice, which can be adults with mental illness who are poor," he said. "We need people to stand up and express their needs and make sure that the funding doesn't get taken away."

Rubicon is the name of a river which Julius Caesar crossed, and changed his life in the process. It is hoped that the clients of Rubicon can be helped to pass over obstacles in their paths and transform the course of their lives.

Rubicon has offices in Berkeley and Hayward, as well as Richmond. It was started in 1973 when then-Governor Ronald Reagan closed the state mental hospitals. It took on the problems of the newly released patients. That was very ambitious, but Rubicon also took on poverty and homelessness in Richmond.

Today, Rubicon provides legal services, helps people make it in employment through the workforce program, and has its own landscaping business which hires ex-prisoners and other people with potential employment obstacles.

To contribute, send checks payable to: Rubicon Programs, Inc., 2500 Bissell Avenue, Richmond, CA 94804. Or click under "Donations" on the Rubicon website to donate with a credit card. To pledge a monthly donation, contact Lynn Peralta at (510) 231-3965.

To benefit from Rubicon's services contact Mental Health Care, Housing and Case Management at (510) 235-1516, or contact Workforce Services at (510) 412-1725, or contact Legal Services at (510) 232-6611. To contact Rubicon Landscape Services call 1-800-644-0770 or 510-412-1772.

A Perfect Storm

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SAN DIEGO STUDENTS PROTEST RACIST ATTACKS

At UC San Diego, the storm took on a particular character due to a series of racist events on campus. The string of incidents began in February, Black History Month, when white fraternity students organized a "ghetto-themed" party called a "Compton Cookout." It was followed by a campus television show that mocked Black History Month.

A few days later, a student hung a noose in the UCSD school library. Anti-hate rallies were organized at other campuses in response, and students sat in at Yudof's Sacramento office.

As students geared up for March 4, a KKK-style hood was found with a hand-drawn circle and cross on the statue of Dr. Seuss outside the UCSD library. At a rally organized at UCLA in protest, student Corey Matthews asked: "What kind of campus promotes an environment that allows people to think it's acceptable to target people for their ethnicity, gender,

or sexuality? It's something about the tone of the environment that allows this."

A month later, UCSD administrators took action against Ricardo Dominguez, an art professor who developed a project to help migrants crossing the desert between Mexico and the United States use their cell phones to orient themselves, and find help in an emergency. Hundreds of migrants die in the U.S. desert each year because they cannot locate water or find shelter from the heat.

Conservative Republican Congressman Brian Bilbray objected to university administrators, who placed Dominguez's tenure under review.

According to Graceland West, a San Diego student leader: "We need more resources for immigrants and people of color on this campus. Instead, a professor with a long history of support for us is being punished for taking a pro-immigrant position. When we have cuts to enrollment and student services, and a lack of financial aid, students of color are the hardest hit. Many now see UCSD as a racist campus. At the same time, higher fees hit high school students thinking about coming here: All this basically deters students of color from applying."