

Homeless shelter closes in Ukiah



The Buddy Eller homeless shelter closed its doors June 30 after it faced a number of budget shortfalls. ADAM RANDALL / UKIAH DAILY JOURNAL

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By Adam Randall

udjar@ukiahdj.com > udjar@ukiahdj.com, [@udjadam](#) on Twitter

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The Buddy Eller Homeless Shelter had helped thousands of unhoused people since it opened in the community in 2003.

Today, the Brush Street location sits empty. Echoes of voices once heard in the 64-bed facility are now a distant memory of what was a safe house to many homeless in Ukiah and Mendocino County.

The June 30 closure wasn't prompted just by a scarcity in funds, but the fact that an increased number of people with mental health and addiction issues were trying to use the facility. Ultimately, people weren't seeking the help they needed to overcome their illness, according to Jacqueline Williams, executive director of the Ford Street Project.

The shelter was also operating under a nonprofit which was sustaining a \$9,000 per month loss.

"We were trying to do too much at one shelter," Williams said. "I'd like the community to understand we did this for an extended period of time, and there's things we certainly could have done differently."

Williams believes the best course of action for the homeless population is



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to tackle their addiction issues. She said the Mendocino County Mental Health Department used to assign mental health professionals to come to the shelter a couple days a week to work with the homeless. However, those positions were cut which hurt the shelter rehabilitation efforts.

"There's a perception in the community that people could just come and stay in the shelter and not take medication, or address an alcohol dependency or any other problem," Williams said.

However, there is a new plan for the facility, and a new vision for its role in the community. Starting in November, a center to treat drug and alcohol abuse will be housed there. Clients will be able to address their addiction while participating in gardening activities, and cooking with fruits and vegetables. This program will promote self-sufficiency, and participants will have to be more community oriented while being clean and sober, Williams said,

"I think we still have some supportive services in the community," Williams said. "But this loss means people won't have a bed at night. Folks who aren't willing to change are stuck. The closing is pushing them to make better choices; sometimes we all need that."

The closing of the facility not only affects the local homeless population, but other shelters and supportive services as well.

Dina Polkinghorne, executive director of Project Sanctuary, said the closure will have a definite impact on her organization's facility.

Project Sanctuary specifically addresses survivors, or those affected by domestic violence.

"If we had somebody at Project Sanctuary who was at the end of their program without housing, we would send them to the Buddy Eller Center," Polkinghorne said.

Domestic abuse victims who come for help at the sanctuary leave their abuser, who is typically a spouse or family member. Most don't return to that abusive household and have to find housing since they can't permanently stay at the sanctuary, Polkinghorne said. That's a niche the Buddy Eller Center filled.

"I think eventually the homeless will leave the area seeking more resources," Polkinghorne said. "The Buddy Eller Center was a huge piece of our safety net, and our net has a huge gaping hole in it now."

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