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South County homeless getting unexpected and large windfall

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When asked what the homeless need in the southern part of San Luis Obispo County, the men who gathered outside People's Kitchen in Grover Beach on Friday didn't hesitate.

Bus passes. A phone. A way to find a job. A dry place to take cover when it rains.

Those working with the homeless population in South County say they've heard similar requests.

And now, an unexpected bequest of \$1.5 million from an Oceano couple to the San Luis Obispo County Community Foundation could provide key funding toward meeting some of those needs.

"The No. 1 priority is a place where they can come during the day and get the help they need so they can move forward," said Patti Diefenderfer, president of the 5Cities Homeless Coalition, a nonprofit organization made up of churches and service agencies serving the South County.

The donation came from the estate of Erna and Hugo Klaproad, who met in Canada and later moved to the United States.

Not much is known about the couple — Erna Klaproad was born in Czechoslovakia, but fled the country with her mother and sister sometime after the Soviet invasion in 1968, said Janice Fong Wolf, director of grants and programs at the Community Foundation.

After her husband's death, Erna Klaproad instructed the Community Foundation that the money from their estate be used to provide shelter and services to the homeless in the Five Cities area, with an emphasis on their immediate needs.

"We were very blessed to be guardians of that funding," Wolf said. The Community Foundation has set an ambitious six-month timetable to discuss the needs, create a plan with community input and distribute the \$1.5 million over the next five years.

The foundation will start working on the plan this morning at a meeting of representatives from local governments, the county and other groups that provide services to the needy in South County.

Estimates of the number of homeless living in the county vary. The Homeless Enumeration Project, a collaboration between the county and Cal Poly in 2006, counted 2,408 homeless people, with 781 in the South County.

A survey released in August by the Homeless Services Coordinating Council found that more than 3,800 people are homeless on any given day in the county.

Stakeholders gathering today include the 5Cities Homeless Coalition, which also wants to establish a permanent location for People's Kitchen. That separate organization provides daily hot meals at the Shouts of Grace Church at 7th Street and Grand Avenue.

Charles Florez was one of several dozen people who had a hot meal at People's Kitchen on Friday. The 49-year-old, who lives in Grover Beach, said something similar to San Luis Obispo's Prado Day Center would benefit the area "because it keeps people off the streets, gives them (access to) phones, mail, and opportunities to find a job."

Also participating today is the Food Bank Coalition of San Luis Obispo County, which operates a 6,000-square-foot warehouse in Oceano.

Executive Director Carl Hansen said the organization has outgrown the warehouse and will work toward becoming part of a one-stop center.

The Food Bank serves about 40,000 people in the county. The Harvest Bag Program's Wednesday morning food giveaway at Soto Field in Arroyo Grande has increased the past two years from 400 bags of food distributed to more than 700 bags, Hansen said.

"There are lots of ways we could work together to accomplish common goals to fight poverty and hunger," he said.

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