

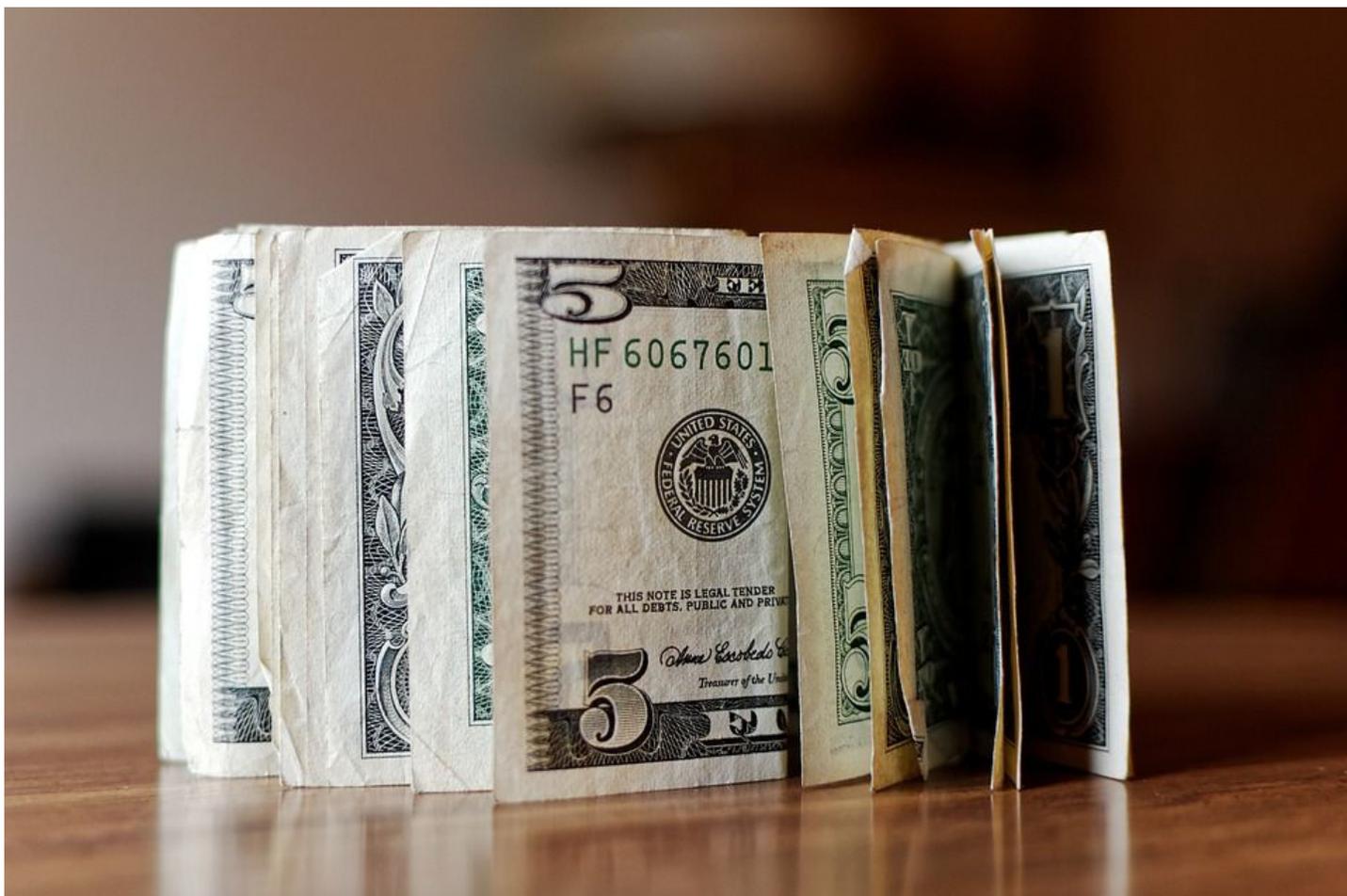


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FEATURED

## River groups to give emergency cash grants to low-wage workers to prevent homelessness

By Frank Robertson, Staff Writer Jan 2, 2018



Jeniffer Wertz hopes to give working people some cash this year if they need it for rent or an overdue utility bill, thanks to a new grant program that started Jan. 1.

Wertz won't be handing out money to just anyone—her focus will be the lower Russian River's hospitality and visitor industry employees, low-wage working people struggling to make ends meet.

"They'll have to be eligible," said Wertz, a volunteer with the Guerneville Community Alliance. "They'll have to show us why they need it."

The non-profit Russian River Alliance (which includes the Guerneville Community Alliance) is one of five recipients getting county grant money this month to address homelessness along the lower Russian River. Starting this week the five groups will have \$450,000 to spend on projects with a shared goal of housing at least 50 unsheltered residents of the lower Russian River where the number of homeless is rising while it's decreasing elsewhere in Sonoma County, according to last January's official count.

Applicants don't necessarily have to be service or hospitality workers, said Wertz. They just have to be local area workers in Rio Nido, Guerneville or Monte Rio, "and they have to be in a situation where they have no other alternatives."

The Guerneville Community Alliance has \$50,000 in grant funds available for this year. Lower River Community Workforce application forms will be available online at the Guerneville Community Alliance website and other social media such as Facebook, and non-profits and river area businesses will provide referrals. Supporters include D&G Equity Management owner Michael DeProto, whose staff handles long-term rentals as well as vacation houses.

“We hope to be able to help prevent 25-30 of our local workers a year from becoming homeless and/or to keep their lights and their heat on,” said DeProto in a letter of support for the program.

“This is a hand up, not a hand out,” said DeProto. “We know of local residents who used to be local workers, but gave up and stopped working because they couldn’t afford housing anymore,” said DeProto in his support letter to Fifth District Sonoma County Supervisor Lynda Hopkins.

Hopkins convinced her fellow supervisors last month to approve the new projects with a goal of getting 50 people, or about 20 percent, of the lower Russian River homeless population into stable housing a year from now.

The four other projects getting funds will address homeless-related issues regarding public safety, tourism and environmental impacts. The Russian Riverkeeper environmental watchdog project will receive \$100,000 to support the Clean River Alliance homeless camp trash-gathering effort started two years ago by Guerneville resident Chris Brokate. The funding will create a paid, full-time job for Brokate to provide services including trash pickup and sanitation disposal at the lower Russian River’s homeless camps.

The Clean River Alliance (CRA) effort has now enrolled about three dozen homeless campers who help keep their camps and their neighbors’ campsites clean, according to the CRA funding application. The grant money will expand the CRA’s currently all-volunteer Clean Camp and Education Program to include an estimated 200 homeless people living in the outdoors from Forestville to Monte Rio, according to CRA.

The largest chunk, approximately \$220,000, of new the grant funding will go to a West County Community Services “rapid rehousing program” offering homeless housing and support services.

The two other grant recipients are Social Advocates for Youth (SAY), which was awarded \$58,000 to help five young (age 18 to 24) lower Russian River people who are homeless or at-risk of homelessness to find stable housing, and Russian River Area Resources and Advocates (RRARA), which works with other non-profit, government, business and civic groups to support common goals such as finding housing for homeless. The money will help pay the part-time salary of RRARA Community Programs Coordinator Jacob Rich.

One project that wasn’t funded, a \$300,000 request from the Patrick McCaffrey Foundation run by Guerneville resident Marcy Cooper, means there’s \$300,000 still available for new homeless housing projects on the lower river.

The Hopkins-appointed Russian River task force, which screened the original proposals, will meet again Jan. 24 to discuss progress of the funded groups and talk about ways to use the remaining \$300,000, said Sonoma County Community Development Commission Executive Director Margaret Van Vliet.

CAMP SIGHT — This straw figure watched over a trail to Vacation Beach where homeless camps were dismantled and partially cleaned up last month ahead of the winter rainy season. Sonoma County is funding several programs to addresses homelessness issues, including one to help keep the area’s camps cleaner and neater. Photo Frank Robertson