Marcos Olivarez was homeless until a community-backed Milpas Outreach Project helped him in his time of need. Now Olivarez sits on the project’s board of directors and leads a gardening project in the Eastside Neighborhood Park near Franklin School. (Gina Potthoff / Noozhawk photo)

Community collaborative of businesses, nonprofits and police partner to help 10 most at-risk Eastside homeless

Weeds sprouted up between rows of asparagus, basil and strawberries seemingly overnight, helping to explain the worry lines across Marcos Olivarez’s forehead on a recent Monday afternoon.

Nobody likes pulling pesky weeds, but Olivarez, a longtime Santa Barbara resident, said he didn’t mind eradicating them from a plot at the Eastside Neighborhood Garden across the street from Franklin School, 1111 E. Mason St.

The tough, methodical work spoke to a nurturing nature within the 55-year-old, who needed help of his own in recent years when he lost his home and his jobs at USA Gasoline and Casa Esperanza.

As one of many who grew up on the Eastside and stayed — even without a roof over his head — the self-proclaimed loner, social drinker and city “eyesore” called the beaches along Cabrillo Boulevard home for a while, then the East Beach Batting Cages.
The sad cycle would’ve continued, he said, if not for Sharon Byrne, the executive director of the Milpas Community Association who helped create a hyper-local plan to house some of the Eastside’s chronic homeless.

Byrne and a group of city and Santa Barbara County partners developed a list of the 10 most at-risk homeless known to hang around the Milpas corridor, with Olivarez at the top.

“I love gardens and I love plants,” said Olivarez, who now leads a group called Pushy Shovels Community Garden, an outlet for those struggling with homelessness or mental illness. “I enjoy working around people and I enjoy giving back.”

He also sits on the board for the Milpas Outreach Pilot program, a community collaborative organizers hope could become a model for others.

So far, five of the 10 people on the list have found homes.

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Sitting in the McDonald’s on Milpas in 2013, with an easy view of the homeless who frequent business storefronts, Byrne and Jeff Shaffer of the Central Coast Collaborative on Homelessness hatched a plan.

Both were already on the Milpas Action Task Force, which focused efforts on improving the relationship between Eastside businesses, residents and the Casa Esperanza homeless shelter at 816 Cacique St.

What the group couldn’t address were those who had burned bridges with shelters and detox facilities, generating the most police calls for loitering, open containers and more.

In order to fund a permanent program to help those homeless, and to see if it would work, Byrne and Shaffer started the pilot.

Earlier this year, the collaborative began meeting every Tuesday to look at each person’s case and to try barreling through red tape and paperwork, since most of the individuals lacked valid identification, birth certificates and other documents.

In addition to MCA and C3H, regular members include representatives from Casa Esperanza, Veteran Affairs in Los Angeles, Common Ground Santa Barbara County, Santa Barbara Restorative Policing and two local formerly homeless (including Olivarez).

The group works alongside a dozen or so other agencies, with the Salvation Army, People’s Self Help Housing, the Housing Authority of the City of Santa Barbara and PathPoint among them.

“I really believed there was a way to kind of unify people around a plan,” Shaffer told Noozhawk. “We looked at other models, and then we pieced this thing together.

“Communities that are reducing homelessness have the business community involved with them. It’s a community taking care of itself approach.”
Alan Bleecker is the longtime owner of Capital Hardware and president of the MCA. Once an admitted user of a heavy-handed approach, he used to call the police on those who regularly slept on the sidewalk outside his store at 711 N. Milpas St.

He wasn’t getting desirable results.

“I was a jerk,” said Bleecker, who serves on the pilot’s board. “I was basically protecting the other businesses by cracking down on negative homeless activity in the area. I decided that, as a business leader, we needed to be examples for other businesses.

“That guy who was the worst on the street, who threatened to kill me twice, is now one of my best employees. These people are just like you or me. Most of the times they’ve just been dealt a bad hand. I’m hoping that somebody some day will look at my efforts and follow suit. This is the right way to get people off the streets.”

Bleecker now talks to local homeless daily — in addition to employing one the past four months — and has taken the time to drive others to detox facilities up north.

Byrne remembers picking up Olivarez near Milpas and dropping him off at the Salvation Army program, where he stayed two years, but not without backsliding into his old life.

He relapsed back into alcohol abuse. He invited former friends without homes to stay in his Westside apartment, which was against the rules.

Byrne drove him and others to appointments or detox, and regularly called to check on a group of folks not accustomed to accepting help.

Olivarez, who became a parent at 18, said he raised his seven children to be self-sufficient because that’s how he grew up.

“When you’re making a big life change like getting sober or leaving the streets and addiction, it’s scary,” Byrne said. “Starting over in a new place — new home — there’s a lot of fear around that. Everybody deserves that second shot. Whether they take it is up to them.”

Staying sober for three months is a great achievement, but all that work means nothing if he or she turns back to alcohol or drugs, said Santa Barbara police Officer Keld Hove of the city’s restorative police.

Hove helps the pilot by trying to direct homeless toward resources instead of ticketing or arresting them, a costly taxpayer expense.

“We benefit from the tenacity of these people working so hard and finding creative ways to helping these individuals,” Hove said. “It’s really a matter of building relationships with these individuals. They can take that time to do that.
“After you work with them for a while you begin to realize what it is that’s getting in the way of what people want in life. It takes a village to take one of these guys from Point A to Point B. They do it with love, patience and latitude. We have great successes ... but it could all go away.”

He said the city pays $600 a month for Olivarez’s bed, and more money is needed for more people — a steal compared to incarcerating Olivarez or others for fighting.

Byrne said the proposed Eastside Business Improvement District could provide funding for the project, but businesses have to back the assessment fees in a vote that likely won’t occur until spring.

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Olivarez frowned as he stared at the cauliflower in his garden. Planted too soon, the leaves were already turning yellow in the heat, a mistake made by over-eager helpers.

He tried salvaging the produce, which he personally delivers to locals in need for free.

“He’s got the gift,” Byrne said. “He understands recovery out of a lifetime journey is hard work. I think he has found his life calling.”

She hoped the pilot project could continue past its original end date early next year, especially since the Santa Barbara Downtown Organization has expressed interest in it.

The organization’s executive director, Maggie Campbell, said developing a scalable model for State Street was a possibility.

“I think this is an issue that affects everyone in our community because it’s a quality of life issue,” she said.

Olivarez said he doesn’t want to mess up the good in his life, so drinking is not allowed in his garden plots. He also vowed to help Byrne any way he can and hopes to help some of his friends.

“Is that Olive Oil?” Olivarez said, mistaking a girl walking by for a homeless woman who gardens in his group. “We haven’t put her on our list yet.”

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