

Mountain View VOICE

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Michelle Le
Michelle Le, an employment counselor at the North County Social Services building, talks to a client.

New home for North County Social Services in MV

WHEN OLD BUILDING SOLD, OFFICE NEARLY MOVED TO SAN JOSE

By Nick Veronin

The North County Social Services Agency is settling in nicely to its new digs, according to the organization's director.

However, the agency, which had to move from its former location at 100 Moffett Blvd., to its new offices at 1330 W. Middlefield Road near Shoreline

Boulevard, almost had to pack up everything and move back to the county seat in San Jose — which would have been a serious loss for the less-fortunate north county locals, according to Mountain View's representative on the county Board of Supervisors.

The county agency charged with helping low-income mid-Peninsula residents find work, feed themselves and their fami-

lies, and get access to financial assistance, fell on hard times toward the end of 2013.

In December, the North County Social Services Agency got word that it would have to find a new home. The agency's landlord, Prometheus Real Estate Group, planned to knock down the building that housed

SOCIAL SERVICES

the agency and replace it with a 184-unit luxury apartment complex of one- and two-bedroom units that could be rented for as much as \$8,000 a month if rents at the developer's Madera complex are any indication.

"These things happen in real estate," said Bruce Wagstaff, director of the Santa Clara County Social Services Agency, which runs offices in Mountain View, San Jose and Gilroy.

It was a particularly challenging time to cut loose from a lease — even for an organization backed by the county. Wagstaff said "it wasn't easy" to find a location in the Mountain View. "It's a competitive environment."

At the time, Santa Clara County Supervisor Joe Simitian said he was concerned that the agency would have to relocate to San Jose — effectively leaving the northern portion of the county without access to a local social services office. There was a precedent for it, after all. The same thing almost happened in the late 1990s, during his first tenure as supervisor of the fifth district, which includes Mountain View and Palo Alto, and runs all the way down to Saratoga.



Eric O'Dell, an employment counselor at the county's Employment Connection Center in Mountain View, helps a client on Tuesday, March 18.

Both times Simitian advocated to keep a location in Mountain View. "The folks in Mountain View and the greater north county area need this help," Simitian told the *Voice*.

"People think that because it's a prosperous area, there is no need for social services," he said. In fact, the opposite is true in his view. The cost of real estate, food and transportation is high in Silicon Valley. "All of those things combine to make it very tough on people of modest means in north county."

If the agency pulled out of Mountain View, that would have meant locals in need of its services would have to get down to San Jose — a difficult task for

those who don't have a car. Simitian said he is happy that the agency was able to stay in Mountain View. The new building on West Middlefield Road has more space and is easily accessible to public transit. "A lot of folks need help, and I'm glad the help is where it's needed right there in the heart of (Mountain View)," he said.

Keeping the agency in Mountain View means that a more diverse population can continue to carve out a life in the heart of Silicon Valley. To Simitian, "diversity" doesn't just mean a variety of different races and ethnic backgrounds. "When we talk about a diverse community, we ought to be talking about economic diversity, (too)," he said. ▣

Mountain View VOICE

December 26, 2014

County offers one-stop shop for social services

By Kevin Forestieri

Santa Clara County partnered up with local nonprofits in Mountain View and Palo Alto last month to make it easier for needy residents to sign up for social services in some of the county's more affluent cities.

The pilot program, kicked off by county Supervisor Joe Simitian, helps low-income Midpeninsula residents find work and get access to food and financial assistance at four local nonprofit locations. Prior to the program there was only one nearby location for Mountain View residents — the North County Social Services Agency at 1330 W. Middlefield Road.

Nonprofit partners include the Community Services Agency (CSA), InnVision Shelter Network in Palo Alto, Sunnyvale Community Services and West Valley Community Services.

Simitian said the added locations make it easier for low-income families and residents to tap into the much-needed services, and that spreading out makes transportation less of a roadblock for those eligible for the state programs.

"One of the myths that's fairly pervasive is that if someone is low-income or homeless they have time on their hands," Simitian said. "Getting through the day is a struggle, and many do not have reliable transportation and rely on (public) transit."

Because the county sends case workers to places like CSA in Mountain View, where people

go for food and other services, county officials are able to create a one-stop shop for people in need, Simitian said. People coming in for the pantry services, for example, might also find out they're eligible for CalFresh, the state's food stamps program, and sign up for it on the spot.

"We will end up serving clients (who) will have never found their way to the county office," Simitian said.

'These folks are largely invisible to too many people in the North County due to our relative affluence.'

COUNTY SUPERVISOR JOE SIMITIAN,
SPEAKING ABOUT THE NEEDY

The pilot program is set to run for one year, but Simitian said it's been successful so far and is likely to continue and expand to other areas.

The county-nonprofits partnership grew from a need that arose last year when the North County Social Services Agency had to uproot and move from its old location at 100 Moffett Blvd. Local nonprofits stepped in to temporarily house social service operations during that period. Though it was intended as a quick fix to keep social services available in the Midpeninsula, it became

clear that such a partnership would allow for more accessibility and greater outreach than before.

Tom Myers, executive director of CSA, said he was more than happy to accommodate one or two case workers at the CSA office during the transition, and realized that giving people the option to sign up for county-run services at the agency was a helpful resource. When the new county office was up and running, Myers told Simitian he wanted to continue the partnership.

"It turned out to be such a fantastic thing that we ended up pushing it and saying, 'Look, let's make this more of a permanent thing,'" Myers said.

Under the new program, someone from the county comes to CSA every Thursday — the nonprofit's busiest day — and is available to help people sign up for CalFresh, among other services.

"Access to good, healthy food is probably one of the most vital things that a low-income family needs," Myers said.

The days and hours when county services are available at each of the sites are somewhat irregular, in part because the nonprofits don't always have the available space or technology needed to sign people up for programs. Simitian said the goal is to be where the services are needed most, which means having a flexible schedule.

"We need to be nimble, and have it when and where it is needed," he said.

Myers said the case worker
(cont. next page)

SOCIAL SERVICES

at CSA will be available every Thursday during open hours. The InnVision Opportunities Services Center also has someone from the county on-site from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m. to sign people up for services. West Valley Community Services offers the services on the third Tuesday of every month from 9 a.m. to 6 p.m.

County social services include signing people up for CalWORKs, CalFresh, Medi-Cal, Cash Assistance Program for Immigrants (CAPI) and refugee services. Anyone on CalWORKs can also be referred to employment centers to learn job-search skills and get child care, transportation, and housing support.

Before finding the location on Middlefield Road, Simitian and the North County Social Services Agency faced having to move the social services office to San Jose, making it difficult for North County residents who need the services but don't have access to a car.

Simitian said the problem was "deja vu all over again" because he had to debate with county staff

and defend the Mountain View office during his first term in the late 1990s; he ultimately was able to convince the county that there is "significant need" for the services in cities like Mountain View and Palo Alto.

When the issue came back in 2013, however, things were a little different. The owner of the property, Prometheus Real Estate Group, planned to raze the building and make way for an apartment complex.

The problem, Simitian said, is that people who need social services in North County are often overlooked because the area includes some of the wealthiest communities in Santa Clara County.

"These folks are largely invisible to too many people in the North County due to our relative affluence," Simitian said.

That "invisibility," on top of higher costs of living and fewer social services, makes it particularly hard for struggling residents.

"People struggling to make ends meet and (who) need these services are under the gun not once, not twice, but three times," Simitian said. ▣