

Project Healthy Neighbors aims to help city's homeless

By MICHAEL ELSETH
NEWS-PRESS CONTRIBUTOR

A line of people wearing brand-new backpacks filled with basic survival items waits for new shoes. Each in turn is fitted with a brand-new pair and sent away beaming. They show off their shoes, stopping friends and volunteers to show them off.

The shoe giveaway is part of the 6th Annual Project Healthy Neighbors, a health fair for the homeless population of Santa Barbara. Project coordinator Ken Williams said he expects more people — about 700 total — to receive services this year than ever before.

The fair, which will run 7:30 a.m. to 11:30 a.m. Monday through Wednesday at Casa Esperanza homeless center, brings together health services and social services to serve Santa Barbara's homeless community. The event is the only one of its kind in Southern California, bringing a wide range of free medical services to the people who need them most.

Mr. Williams, a local social worker, said participants are drawn by the free shoes and the backpacks. Each participant is required to complete a "health ticket" checklist before getting in line for shoes.

The health stations cover physical, mental, and emotional needs, from tuberculosis tests and flu shots to mental health evaluations and counseling referrals. About 150 health professionals and volunteers have offered their services for this year's fair, doing screenings, check-ups, referrals, and basic treatments.

Cheryl Guth has been homeless for four years since losing her home after she was unable to pay taxes on it. She said she came to the health fair this year because she wanted the sneakers, but she also needed the tuberculosis shot and the flu vaccine.

Ms. Guth said she is in poor health, and appreciates the services because they help guard her health for the winter. She lives near the railroad tracks, she said, where she and a homeless friend take care of each



STEVE MALONE / NEWS-PRESS PHOTOS

Above, students from Midland School hand out shoes to homeless participants in the 6th Annual Project Healthy Neighbors at Casa Esperanza in Santa Barbara on Monday. Below, Physician Assistant Dwight Royston, who gives primary care services to Santa Barbara County's homeless population, worked with 10 patients at the health fair.

other.

"We mostly just have to try to stay alive," she said.

Another woman without a home is Heidi, who has lived in Santa Barbara since she was seven and is now 46. She said she came specifically for the TB shot because she plans to stay in Casa Esperanza's winter shelter this year. The toiletries provided in her new backpack are the best part of the health fair, though, she said, because they're essentials for daily life.

Dwight Royston, a Physician Assistant who gives primary care services to Santa Barbara County's homeless community, treated 10 patients during Monday's event. He said his consultations covered everything from mental health to checkups and heart health consultations.



Please see **HEALTHY** on **A10**