

From: [Board Of Supervisors](#)
To: [Agenda Management Support](#)
Subject: item 8 comment_Hightree, D
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From: Dawn Hightree <usoleccompany@gmail.com>
Sent: Monday, April 28, 2025 7:48 AM
To: Board Of Supervisors <boardofsupervisors@santacruzcountycal.gov>
Subject: Urgent: Comment for Line 8-Tues 4/29/2025 vote

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Chair and Members of the Santa Cruz County Board of Supervisors

701 Ocean Street

Santa Cruz, CA 95060

Re: Advocacy for the Continuation and Expansion of MHCAN's Peer-Run Services

Dear Chair and Members of the Board,

My name is Dawn Hightree, and I am writing today to respectfully urge the Board to preserve and support the Mental Health Client Action Network (MHCAN) and its irreplaceable peer-run model, which has been a life-saving foundation for hundreds of community members — including myself. I would like it if you would suggest that MHCAN services continue to be supported. One obvious reason for a refusal to stop funding MHCAN is because Behavior Health has no plan for current clients that come to MHCAN. Waiting for buildings to be built someday is not effective planning and management of the most vulnerable in Santa Cruz. MHCAN's clients will not seek services with the county like they do at MHCAN. MHCAN is unique and irreplaceable in that way. It provides a homey comfortable atmosphere instead of a sterile confined one. This would be a serious neglect to continuation of services for the clients of Bldg K as well. It is noted that those suffering from mental illnesses will be negatively impacted. There will be nowhere to go. I propose that Behavior Health bridge the gap with a new program that I am in charge of developing for MHCAN called the Living

with Dignity Housing Program. With the supplementation of a formal partnership providing long term housing solutions for MHCAN clients, I urge you to not approve the current proposal that removes supportive services for MHCAN.

In 2015, I was referred to MHCAN by Building K while experiencing homelessness and symptoms of schizophrenia brought on by PTSD and extreme stress. MHCAN's welcoming, peer-centered environment provided me with what no traditional service could: respite, food, coffee, human connection, and a safe place to rebuild my life. I spent hours each day at MHCAN studying while working toward my Associate of Arts degree at Cabrillo College. Many days, I would be making food in the kitchen, laughing with other guests, and fixing them food with their request which visibly made them smile. I could see that many would benefit from my support giving them strength to self-care utilizing services from MHCAN. Volunteering there restored my dignity, gave me purpose, and rekindled my hope. Without MHCAN, I would not have survived — let alone succeeded.

Having gone to MHCAN regularly for years, I know firsthand how life-saving it is for Santa Cruz's most vulnerable residents. Without the food, coffee, peer-led groups, access to computers, a living room atmosphere with couches, and a daily social structure, many clients would fall into deeper mental health crises, get trespassing tickets they can't afford, do property damage and other unlawful outbursts out of frustration of the lack of community support, or end up in jail. MHCAN is a critical lifeline. In a community where other spaces have excluded them, MHCAN is often the only place where individuals can regroup, feel dignified, and begin working toward stability and recovery.

Since that time, I have graduated from CSU Monterey Bay with a Bachelor of Arts in Collaborative Health and Human Services (Nonprofit Management concentration) and a 3.88 GPA. I completed an SBA-supported business cohort, founded Usolec Company, launched my business through successful grant funding, and published a book in 2021.

In July 2024, I was formally contracted by MHCAN's Executive Director, Tyler Starkman, through my company, Usolec Company, to develop the Living with Dignity Program proposal for CORE funding and to expand MHCAN's strategic services to include housing initiatives partnering with Behavior Health Services. Tyler recognized the power of lived experience: I am both a professional grant writer and a former MHCAN client. This embodies the very mission of MHCAN — empowering those who have overcome mental illness and homelessness to become leaders, designers, and agents of positive change.

Discontinuing MHCAN's services would leave hundreds without access to life-saving support. Studies show that unhoused individuals with untreated severe mental illness are at a suicide risk 8 to 10 times greater than the general population <https://nhchc.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/suicide-fact-sheet.pdf> (National Alliance on Mental Illness, 2018). Losing MHCAN would mean increased homelessness, crisis hospitalizations, preventable deaths, and greater public health burdens at a time when recovery models are desperately needed.

MHCAN has already taken bold, proactive steps to align with Santa Cruz County Behavioral Health's housing and stabilization goals. I have been working closely with Executive Director Tyler Starkman to formulate a formal partnership with Behavioral Health Services and to create expanded funding pathways. [Our plan](#) includes embedding onsite Behavioral Health case management and counseling services within MHCAN's welcoming, peer-centered environment — making housing pathways and clinical support more accessible to those who might otherwise refuse traditional settings. I am currently updating this plan to include the bridge framework with Behavior Health Services. I will provide that once I have approvals to do so.

Unfortunately, County Behavioral Health officials were unaware of this developing partnership work prior to their decision to propose ending MHCAN's funding. I am currently engaged in formally communicating MHCAN's goals, service expansions, and willingness to adapt while remaining true to its successful peer-run model. I am requesting that the County reconsider and amend the current Behavioral Health proposal to include bridge funding for MHCAN's operations and expansion efforts.

I look forward to discussing these plans directly with County Behavioral Health and to working collaboratively toward a solution that supports the dignity, resilience, and recovery of Santa Cruz County's most vulnerable residents. I apologize for the delay in getting this important work done and communicated to the interested parties to prevent the lack of support for MHCAN. I have been asked to help Tyler Starkman to resolve this matter immediately as well as attend MHCAN Board of Directors meetings to ensure support of our projects.

Thank you for your leadership, your commitment to dignity for all, and your willingness to listen to voices of lived experience. I look forward to speaking at the upcoming hearing to share my story personally.

Respectfully,

Dawn Hightree

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