

DA, Human Services open Minna St. office

PHOTO: MARJORIE BEGGS

It was an impressive, noisy crush — more than 100 politicians, police, social services staff, reporters, photographers, hotel residents, street people, all jammed onto the corner and spilling into the street at Sixth and Minna for the Jan. 8 grand opening of the Community Justice Office.

“This is where the criminal justice system meets the neighborhood,” Assistant DA Mike Menesini, the new office’s director, told the crowd. “You’ll see a difference — I promise you.”

Located at 136 Sixth, on the ground floor of the Sunnyside Hotel and across Minna from the Rose, the Community Justice Office hopes to become walk-in central for residents who feel victimized or threatened, and who need help with food stamps, Medi-Cal, housing and more.

Services at the 600-square-foot office will ramp up gradually: Menesini is at his desk three days a week, a volunteer from SAFE (Safety Awareness for Everyone) comes on Tuesdays, and Department of Human Services homelessness and food stamps reps are there on Thursdays with other DHS to be rotated in other days. A schedule posted on the window lets community folks know when they can get face-to-face help with specific needs. Also on site is the Tenderloin Housing Clinic, which leases the space and makes desks available to DHS and the DA’s office gratis.

Before the official opening-event speeches, the milling media maneuvered their mikes and cameras toward District Attorney Terence Hallinan, Menesini and DHS Director Trent Rhorer. Rhorer told *The Extra* that though the partnership with the DA’s office is indeed “unusual for DHS,” he felt confident that it would work well.

Providing services to residents may take a while, Rhorer said. “We have other food stamps and Medi-Cal outreach sites [in the Inner and Outer Mission] but Sixth Street is a different, difficult population — we need to get their trust, and a lot of that will just come with word of mouth. Eventually we’ll become another resource for residents.”

The police, too, have a stake in this new site. Lt. Mark Swendsen, day watch lieutenant at Southern Station, and Assis-



Assistant DA Mike Menesini announced the opening of the office as DA Terence Hallinan, far right, watches.

stant Chief of Police Prentice Saunders weighed in with their hopes for the new Sixth Street presence.

“Policing is a partnership,” Saunders said. “We’re here to be a team [with the DA and DHS], and we’re going to work with the community to solve the problems.”

“It takes a total response from the community to fight crime,” Swendsen added. “For the police, I want the shoe leather HERE, right on the street.”

Swendsen also said he was looking forward to the office’s first planned project: a community court that is part of the pilot South of Market/Tenderloin Restorative Justice Project.

A woman elbowed her way through the crowd on the sidewalk toward Menesini. Standing close, she told him about her homelessness and her SSI, which was about to lapse, and that she was glad he was going to be here on Sixth Street and that she’d had trouble with drugs but was clean now and . . .

Menesini listened patiently, invited her to go inside for pastries and coffee, and encouraged her to “drop by soon.”

Menesini talked a while with Thomas Rodriguez and Denise Jackson who’d walked over from the Rose. Rodriguez told *The Extra* he’s lived at the Rose for 18 years, is one of five residents on the community court steering committee and has high hopes for the new Community Justice Office.

Jackson, the Rose’s support services manager and also a steering committee member, was hopeful, too: “I think the

office being here will deter some crime, maybe not in all of South of Market, but in this immediate area.” Asked how that will work, she answered, “More eyes.”

The official speeches weren’t too long. Briefly:

“We’re enthusiastic,” Rhorer said.

“It’s a new day,” said Tenderloin Housing Clinic Director Randy Shaw.

“I’d like to officially welcome the DA’s office to Sixth Street,” said District 6 Supervisor Chris Daly.

“People who live on the street have a right to safety,” Hallinan said. To get some height in the crowd, he tried to stand on a small wooden plank on top of a cardboard box. But the box soon started to collapse. Wisely, he got off. “People have a right not to be beaten up, not to be rolled. We’re going to have a lot of protection here.”

A half-hour later, by then most people had drifted away, Menesini reflected on the large opening-day turnout:



Mike Menesini listens to a woman’s story as the cameras roll.

PHOTO: CARL ANGEL

“People really want to see changes here and I think they will. Being in the neighborhood, we’ll be closer to the people’s concerns.”

Asked how he’ll know if the office is successful, he said, “I think we’ll get that information by anecdote — by word of mouth on the street — but we’ll also see it in the number of arrests and felony convictions. I think we’ll know in 90 days if we’re having an impact.”

In early February, a month after the opening, *The Extra* caught up with Menesini to see how things were going.

“This has become a big spirit-raiser for the community,” he said. “I’m pleasantly surprised at the level of support. The people coming in — about 10 to 15 a day — keep expressing gratitude for our being here.”

Office staff keep logs on the walk-ins, who are not required to give their names. So far, their concerns have ranged from complaints about being victimized, problems finding housing, and accusations of police brutality to requests for help with traffic tickets, Menesini said. “One guy claimed he was being followed by the CIA, but mostly, these are real concerns and we can help.”

Menesini also is pushing to get the community court program up and running by June, he said, because it will be a more organized, neighborhood-based system for resolving quality-of-life issues.

Menesini said he’s even getting support from the courts. “In the last few weeks, I’ve taken several cases to court and gotten convictions for crimes in this corridor,” he said. That didn’t always happen before the Community Justice Office opened down here. ■

TL Futures Collaborative catching on

Marjorie Beggs

The Tenderloin Futures Collaborative continues to pack ‘em in. Agenda items from sex shops to SLUG updates draw more than 20 people, mostly service providers, to the monthly meetings at St. Anthony’s.

At the January meeting, St. Anthony’s outreach worker Roscoe Hawkins, who helps coordinate the collaborative with TNDC’s Kathleen Mullin, reported on the opening of

the new Community Justice Office on Sixth Street.

In February, Amy Petersen, Safety Network Program community organizer, added information about the new community court planned for South of Market/Tenderloin, which will be coordinated out of the Justice office. Last July, she said, the DA’s office wanted to set up a neighborhood court, but community members nixed the

DA’s model (operating in four other neighborhoods) and created their own. Planned start-up date is June.

Agenda items carry over from month to month as they emerge, unfold, twist, turn and sometimes are becalmed for lack of wind or momentum.

In December, Collaborative members got up in arms about a Friends of Rec and Park fund-raising letter that

praised the recent transformation of Boeddeker Park. Foul, cried Connie Latch, park advisory committee member, insisting that the money had gone for naught, that the park looked terrible, except for the children’s garden that she and others had helped create.

The Friends and SLUG (S.F. League of Urban Gardeners), which was in charge of the Boeddeker upgrade, were

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The Extra joins neighborhood news group

Central City Extra has joined the San Francisco Neighborhood Newspaper Association — now 15 papers totaling 290,000 circulation in every ZIP code in the city.

On Jan. 15, the 10 publishers assembled in a banquet room of the Crown Plaza Hotel voted unanimously to accept *The Extra*. With association membership, *The Extra* has increased its circulation to 8,000, hired a full-time reporter — Billy Lux, a former Tenderloin resident — and begins regular monthly publication with this issue.

Also, at the same annual meeting, the association joined the New California Media Group after listening to a heartfelt explanation of that fledgling statewide media force from Sandy Close of Pacific News Service, who founded New Cal Media. The Chronicle runs a selection of stories from Close’s group each Sunday as its Bay Area Bridges column. The Richmond ReView’s citywide study of homicide cases was recently featured in Chron’s Bridges.

The S.F. neighborhood newspapers include — besides *The Extra* — Downtown, Richmond ReView, Marina Times, El Tecolote, Noe Valley Voice, San Francisco Bay View, New Fillmore, New Bernal Journal, West of Twin Peaks Observer, West Portal Monthly, New Mission News, San Francisco Observer, Sunset Beacon and the North Beach Journal.

The newspapers as a bloc reach more San Franciscans than any single publication in the city, appealing to advertisers who wish to saturate a neighborhood or the entire city, and to readers who want more local news.

— Geoff Link



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