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Seniors to stay

Minister negotiates agreement at seniors park.

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Byline:JEFF ROWE Tustin News

About 300 seniors are sleeping more soundly now thanks to the diplomatic efforts of the president of the Orange County Rescue Mission.

Normally, **Jim Palmer** fills his days tending to the county's thousands of homeless, laboring to get them food and shelter while also striving to raise money and materials to complete the Village of Hope at the old Tustin air base. Now Palmer can add "diplomat" to his titles of president of the mission, commissioner of the Orange County Housing Authority and an ordained minister with the Village Church of Irvine.

Palmer negotiated an agreement between the residents of the Tustin Village Mobile Home Park and the new caretakers, Sierra Corporate Management of Anaheim. Participants say Palmer succeeded because he refocused the discussion from rent rates and Sierra's conversion plan to broader issues of health, crime and safety.

The drama began earlier this year when Sierra took over stewardship of the 43-year-old park and told residents of plans to convert to a family park and boost space rents, which had averaged about \$600 per month.

That induced palpitations in the senior community, some of whom feared their tranquility would implode as the village became a family park -- if the rent raises didn't push them over the financial brink first.

A languished homeowners association at the park awakened, called Mayor Lou Bone and asked for a meeting with Sierra President Abe Arrigotti.

Communications to that point mostly had consisted of "hollering and screaming," said Billy Hall, acting president of the homeowners association.

Enter Palmer.

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Correction:

Palmer is perhaps a professional persuader. He's talked hundreds of people into donating to the Village of Hope, the 192-bed homeless shelter and training center rising from the northeast corner of the old Tustin air base.

Palmer's motivation for entering the Tustin fray: To keep any of the seniors from joining the 35,000 already homeless in Orange County. And moving the discussion to areas of common concern cooled both sides and enabled Arrigotti to get to know some of the residents.

A compromise was brokered: Sierra would leave the park as seniors-only if residents accepted gradual rent raises. Moreover, Sierra agreed to reduce rent in creases for several tenants receiving federal assistance.

And, Sierra agreed to improve security at the park.

"Abe (Arrigotti) is a very reasonable man," Palmer said.

Arrigotti pronounced his company "content" with the agreement. "The residents are happy, and that was really important to us."

For Palmer, it was another success of the sort that earned him a national "Points of Light" award last year for his efforts for the poor and homeless.

In a letter to the editor of the Tustin News, Reid and Dorothy Hausch wrote that "two months ago, we were on the verge of losing our homes and our way of life." The letter goes on to say they will remain at the park "largely due to Jim's efforts."

For Palmer, it was another day's work. "We did not know any of these people," he said of the park residents. "But they were in need. And we serve the last, the least and the lost."

(949) 553-2914 or jrowe@ocregister.com

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