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Local

Safe Haven program encourages businesses to keep locals secure



(Cindy Chew/The Examiner)

A Safe Haven flyer is posted at the Wild Awakenings cafe in the Tenderloin.

Brent Begin, The Examiner

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SAN FRANCISCO -

For anyone in the Tenderloin who has ever looked for a place to avoid a street scuffle or other unsafe situation, there's now a refuge available. A sign in the window of a Tenderloin business could be the only difference between life and death, a local housing activist claims.

James Tracy has helped pioneer a fledgling San Francisco program called Safe Haven that trains businesses to de-escalate conflicts and encourages locals, especially children and the elderly, to use public spaces for their safety.

Tracy, part of Tenderloin-based Community Housing Partnership, said asking businesses to participate was difficult at first because owners felt it might be a risk. Only 10 agreed initially, but Tracy said there are now 23 establishments involved.

Current participants include grocery stores, produce shops, shelters, cafes, hotels, churches and community centers. Organizers hope to include 45 businesses by the time the program hits its first anniversary. Tracy said the program is unique because it isn't overly reliant on police.

Lavada Moore, a tenant of participating business Iroquois Hotel at O'Farrell and Larkin streets, has helped petition businesses to join the network.

"It's a big deal for people who walk up and down Sixth Street or through the Tenderloin," Moore said. "Basically they have a place to run to if they need help."

San Francisco Capt. Gary Jimenez has also given the program approval, despite any risk to shopkeepers. Organizers recently presented the plan at a local community meeting.

Tracy said there have already been instances where the safe havens have helped. A man had a seizure in front of a hotel that was already part of the network, he said. When two men tried to grab the man's wallet, a woman rang the doorbell of the safe haven and the police and paramedics arrived within seconds. There have been other incidents since the program began in August.

"Kids will be scared," he said. "They'll come in to a safe haven and call their parents and the parents will come pick them up."

One of the keys to the Safe Haven campaign is training local business owners. Tracy said teaching "de-escalation" techniques to shopkeepers helps them deal with the mentally unstable or report an emergency.

"Shutting the door isn't the only way to de-escalate a situation," he said. "Most of the time it's better to deal with a situation rather than shut it out."

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