

## Relocation Blues in Paradise?

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Relocation has become an integral part of American life in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. According to American Demographics Magazine, 43 million Americans move in a given year. More than a third of those responding to a survey about life transitions by Roper Starch Worldwide reported trouble adjusting to long-distance moves. Many social commentators have documented the toll this transience takes on families and communities. Indeed relocation presents formidable problems for individuals, businesses and communities.

Unique challenges await people relocating to the Santa Barbara community. Issues recurrently in the headlines here belie harsh realities for newcomers behind the pleasant Central Coast scenes that greet their arrival.

Newcomers unfamiliar with local Realtors and the real estate market are often unprepared for the depth and persistence of the Santa Barbara housing shortage. Childcare shortages exist nationwide, but finding quality child care is particularly difficult for parents who don't know the local providers. A similar problem exists in locating elder care for dependent senior relatives.

In spite of the current low unemployment rates, competition for desirable jobs in Santa Barbara remains intense. So does competitiveness among small businesses. "Trailing spouses" of transferred employees from two-income families, and those following a dream here, tend to collide with these realities sooner rather than later in Santa Barbara.

Even seeking escape from all of this through the Santa Barbara entertainment scene can be a challenge. It takes the newcomer a while to learn when and where to look for such information. It is easy to miss critical information about one's particular interests amid the heavy traffic on today's information superhighway. Moreover, publicity for major events often occurs at the last minute. Beyond advertising, useful information on which performers merit one's limited entertainment dollar can be hard to come by. Once well-informed, the entertainment consumer may find frequent peaks and valleys in the availability of entertainment, with the comings and goings of music series, theater groups, etc.

Of course, all of the above problems are compounded by Santa Barbara's high cost of living. Newcomers often experience a series of unpleasant discoveries of just how many things cost more here.

In many ways, Santa Barbara is a microcosm of the country. Given the multiple personal stresses which accompany a move, many of the nearly 500,000 employees transferred by their companies each year (according to The Conference Board) are reluctant to relocate when asked

to do so. Thus, employers are increasingly offering help for those relocating.

This has given birth to a \$15 billion relocation industry in the U.S., reports the Employee Relocation Council. Relocation specialists usually offer practical help with physical and financial needs such as home finding, shipping belongings, and job hunting for trailing spouses. They may also relay information from the chamber of commerce on local businesses.

The social and emotional aspects of the transition, the so-called soft relocation issues, are often overlooked. These may include frustration and stress, challenges to interpersonal skills, failure to connect with co-workers and general social isolation.

In some cases soft relocation issues can translate into serious problems such as depression and alcohol or drug abuse. Some studies have even found higher suicide rates among persons who have relocated. Though often neglected, these soft relocation issues can also affect the bottom line for employers, especially in the current tight labor market. Soft issues can have a hard impact on the job performance and ultimate retention of the new or transferred employee.

Most new residents deal with soft relocation issues on their own, with the support of a romantic partner, family or long-distance calls to significant others. Essentially, soft issues present newcomers with a challenge to consciously create a fulfilling lifestyle from the ground up. This requires far more initiative than participating in established social networks and routines. However, starting out in a new place also offers a chance to choose a life that more fully reflects one's values. Toward this end, Santa Barbara provides many opportunities for meaningful citizen involvement in improving the community.

A prime concern in creating a new life is making social connections. In many ways this is both critical and demanding for persons who have just relocated. New connections come more easily for established residents through introductions and social invitations by existing friends and acquaintances. For the newcomer trying to connect, encouragement and corrective feedback on his or her efforts can be hard to come by without supportive local relationships.

Thus, transitions to a new location can place high demands on a person's communication, decision-making, goal-setting, self-management, stress-reduction and problem-solving skills. For those struggling in meeting these demands, some mental health professionals offer classes, seminars or groups to help strengthen these coping skills. Such support can be of help in dealing with the social demands of being new in town. The best advice is to choose assistance that includes direct skills practice, feedback and mastery.

Acquiring information is also important in dealing with the uncertainties accompanying change, yet much information can be unavailable to those who have no local social supports. This can place

potentially helpful resources out of reach.

Establishing relationships through the communication skills mentioned above is the best means for getting needed information, especially inside information, about one's workplace, one's career and social opportunities. Though mental health professionals can provide some assistance in getting such information, the ideal sources are peers who have similar values and interests. However, finding and connecting with such people can require patience, perseverance, and a tolerance for rejection.

Research on communication suggests that established individuals may actually withhold information until they trust the newcomer and decide that they wish to get closer to him or her. For a dramatization of this process, just watch the scene in a Western movie where a stranger rides into town. The quality of information available improves with the closeness of new relationships until the stranger actually gets access to inside information.

In a similar vein, some current residents see a stranger riding into town as the embodiment of their fears about growth and overdevelopment. Just as Santa Barbara creates challenges for newcomers, newcomers create challenges for Santa Barbara.

Some of our reactions are healthy self-protection. This need not translate into a less-than-warm welcome for newcomers, however. One of my most vivid memories of the first of my two moves to this state was sighting shortly after my arrival of one of those "Welcome to California, now go home" bumper stickers. Perhaps the price of real estate here produces overzealousness about property rights, rousing our primitive instincts for protecting physical and social turf.

Growth does not happen because we're too welcoming to individuals who decide to move here. It is important to remember that all of us, with the exception of the Chumash, are immigrants here by family history, if not by personal experience. Occasionally even those established residents who recall their own (or their family's) relocation trials take a they-should-have-to-suffer-as-I-did attitude. Such residents can build a better community if instead they help newcomers with encouragement, advice, introductions and invitations.

If we show newcomers our way of life in a manner that reveals how we value it, we welcome them to join us in protecting Santa Barbara from the forces that would destroy her. Those who have recently arrived will do well to be patient with our cautiousness. Before long, with some effort, risk-taking and planning on their own behalf, newcomers will feel that they belong here.

Chief Seattle might counsel us that Santa Barbara does not belong to us; we belong to Santa Barbara. By realizing that ourselves and helping newcomers realize it we can best keep alive what we hold dear about Santa Barbara's culture and natural beauty. The stronger community we create will in turn deeply influence whom we each become in the future.

