

Volunteers prepare for annual homeless count



Info helps secure federal money, understand causes

Capi Lynn Salem Statesman Journal | USA TODAY NETWORK

All year long, advocates and volunteers struggle to put a face on the homeless crisis, humanizing the men, women and children living on Salem's streets.

But Wednesday, for one day only, their sole objective will be to turn everyone into a statistic.

A network of advocates and nonprofits, with help from an army of volunteers, will conduct a homeless count for Marion and Polk counties.

Teams of Statesman Journal reporters and photographers will tag along. We'll provide updates throughout the day on StatesmanJournal.com. We hope you tag along, too, as we begin to put a face on the homeless in our community.

Through a series of images and stories this year, we will shine a

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This makeshift camp appeared in the parking lot of Union Gospel Mission on Dec. 23 in downtown Salem.

MOLLY J. SMITH/
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Top: A network of advocates and nonprofits, with help from an army of volunteers, will conduct a homeless count for Marion and Polk counties. DANIELLE PETERSON/STATESMAN JOURNAL FILE

Homeless

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spotlight on our homeless crisis. We will report on what is working in our community and what is not. We will team up with experts to explain the roots of the problem, how homelessness has changed, and perhaps even offer some solutions.

It all starts with the annual Point-in-Time count, which is mandated by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development for communities across the country to be eligible for money for programs that address homelessness.

The PIT count is locally coordinated and executed on a single day/night. HUD requires it be done in the last 10 days of January because it's the coldest time of year and more people are likely to be seeking shelter, giving communities a more accurate snapshot of homelessness at its peak.

Information gathered helps our community secure federal dollars, understand the causes and identify gaps in current services.

The count is part of a formula HUD uses to award grants through the Continuum of Care Program, which is designed to promote a community-wide commitment to the goal of ending homelessness.

"The better we're able to count it, the better we're able to draw funding back to our area for more resources to address a problem that is getting worse," said Jimmy Jones, program director of the nonprofit Mid-Willamette Valley Community Action Agency.

Community Action and other agencies serving the homeless in Marion and Polk counties rely on as much as \$900,000 annually in Continuum of Care grants.

The grants this year total about \$745,000 and will be divided between Community Action, Shangri-La and Salem Interfaith Hospitality Network. That's an increase of about \$150,000 from last year.

While that's a huge chunk of change, it's a relatively small piece of the pie for each agency.

"HUD dollars are 10 percent of our budget," Jones said.

The funds have remained fairly steady despite a fluctuation in the number of homeless people identified in Marion and Polk counties from year to year. The count has ranged from 718 to 3,366 since 2007. The average dur-

Beth Hays of Community Resource Trust unloads boxes of sleeping bags at the ARCHES Project in Salem on Thursday. Items will be distributed to the homeless during the Point-in-Time count on Wednesday. ANNA REED/STATESMAN JOURNAL

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ing that span is more than 2,100.

Last year, 1,151 homeless people were counted.

Local organizers acknowledge the count is arduous, but it's a hoop they must jump through.

They say HUD's parameters have changed over the years and the methodology of collecting data has varied. The weather, advance police sweeps, and the natural movement of the homeless population also have contributed to the fluctuation.

Counting the homeless is a daunting task that will be overseen by the Community Action's ARCHES Program.

"This is such a crazy, difficult thing to do," lead organizer Diane Merry said. "We try to do a better job every year, which makes it that much more work as we try to get out to places like Mill City and Falls City."

Merry has been with Community Action for 27 years. She's been involved with every count.

It's never difficult to round up volunteers to help, but managing them is. More than 100 people have signed up to assist on Wednesday and will be organized in teams and assigned to specific areas.

I was a volunteer for the count in 2009, and finding homeless people was

a challenge. They often move from place to place, depending on the time of day and the season, and they don't always want to be found.

Volunteers undergo training and will be armed with clipboards and survey forms. Each person counted will be logged by the first letter of their first name, the first three letters of their last name, and their date of birth to ensure there is no duplication.

The one-page survey focuses on how long they've been homeless, the causes of their homelessness, and where they're staying now.

Mobile teams will hit the usual hotspots where the homeless congregate, including Wallace Marine Park and Cascades Gateway Park. They will canvass under bridges, on riverbanks and in bushes and brambles.

Advocates have spread the word about the count, offering incentives for people to come to designated survey sites.

Thanks to a \$5,000 grant from United Way of the Mid-Willamette Valley, 185 sleeping bags, 100 tents, 450 pairs of socks and 300 metal water bottles will be handed out at various locations.

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