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Counting the homeless in Loveland

Daily Reporter-Herald, The (Loveland, CO)-January 26, 2013
Readability: 10-12 grade level (Lexile: 1170L)
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Because 39-year-old Eric Paul has a dog, he cannot stay at the 137 Homeless Connection night shelter during cold weather, so he sleeps in a tent.

Luckily, Lucky, a 4-year-old catahoula, serves as a good watchdog against intruders and other animals.

"It's real tough," Paul said. "You don't have running water. You have to worry about animals getting into your food supply."

Paul, homeless off and on since 2007, has arthritis in his knees and bursitis in his hips, making it difficult for him to work eight hours straight.

"I do work for some people downtown," Paul said about doing odd jobs, like shoveling snow and cleaning up storefronts.

Paul, who has a camp set up in a hidden location, was not counted Tuesday night during the point-in-time 2013 Count of Loveland's Homeless, conducted by social service agencies and volunteers.

The preliminary count indicated 117 homeless individuals are living in Loveland, but not all of the required forms have been turned in for the count.

"The fact we were able to find 117 in a very short period of time is alarming," said Alison Hade, administrator of the Community Partnership Office of the city of Loveland.

A point-over-time survey conducted last year between Nov. 1, 2011, to March 31, 2012, identified 685 homeless people, representing a far more accurate count, Hade said.

It's estimated that in any one city or town, 1 percent of the population is homeless, Hade said, quoting the National Alliance to End Homelessness.

The Count

Hade conducted the homeless count with a staff member from her office, Doug Ashbaugh, homeless program manger for the 137 Homeless Connection of the House of Neighborly Service, and 11 volunteers.

If You Go

What: Community Conversation about Homelessness.

When: 9-11 a.m. Thursday, Jan. 31.

Where: Loveland Museum/Gallery, 503 N. Lincoln Ave.

RSVP: Call Alison Hade at 962-2517 or email her at alison.hade@cityofloveland.org.

The team of 14 counted and interviewed sheltered and unsheltered individuals and families within city limits as part of a larger statewide count required by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. HUD wants to identify the local needs for services and programs, to measure the progress in ending homelessness and to raise public awareness.

The Colorado Coalition for the Homeless is overseeing the count and reporting the final results to HUD.

The point-in-time count tallied the sheltered homeless, but Hade and Ashbaugh counted both sheltered and unsheltered individuals to achieve a more comprehensive count. The count of both populations is required every other year.

The count in Loveland involved three components, including:

Homeless shelters, such as the 137 Connection night shelter at rotating churches and the Angel House church partners that shelter homeless families; transitional housing through the House of Neighborly Service and Alternatives to Violence; and permanent supportive housing with access to mental health services and other resources.

The street by checking cars, parks and tents by knocking on doors and going to homeless campsites.

Service-based locations, such as the Loveland Community Kitchen, House of Neighborly Service and Alternatives to Violence, conducted Wednesday to Friday.

"The goal is to determine where people were sleeping that night," Hade said. "We could have done that without putting volunteers in danger. It requires volunteers to actually go out after dark and poke around to determine where someone is sleeping."

Those Left Out

Ashbaugh, who works with the homeless population on a regular basis at the 137 Connection, had to prep those he knew about the paper survey. He let them know that the survey was for HUD and not to inform law enforcement of campsites and other public places where they sleep.

"It won't capture all of the homeless people staying in Loveland, like those staying at a friend's house that evening," Hade said. "This doesn't even begin to count people who sleep in sheds and garages."

Plus, there are those in hiding, like Martha, a 38-year-old single woman living in a tent who cannot reveal her last name for reasons of personal security. Like Paul, she has a dog, a German shepherd rescue, and cannot stay in a shelter.

"I went from having a normal life to this," Martha said about having a day care business and a home before she escaped a domestic violence situation. "People think of homeless as dirty and gross. I'm not dirty and gross."

Wendy Blankenship, a volunteer at 137 Connection, used to be homeless.

"People seem to think you need to be dirty to be homeless," Blankenship said.

Another misconception is that the homeless are in that situation for drugs and alcohol abuse, which often isn't the case, Ashbaugh said.

"There's lots of other issues," Ashbaugh said, listing mental illness, legal issues, lack of work and the high cost of rent as factors.

Ashbaugh and his staff will not kick anyone out of the night shelter for alcohol abuse (indicated by a nightly Breathalyzer test), unless there are ongoing behavioral issues linked with the drinking.

In four years, Ashbaugh has had to put three people on a list requiring they blow a zero on the test before they could stay in the shelter.

"All of our rules are based on behavior," Ashbaugh said. "You can't verbally or physically disrespect people."

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