

Mission: Count region's homeless population

By STEPHANIE PORTER-NICHOLS

Published: January 22, 2010

Editor's note: This is the first of a multi-part series on the changing faces of homelessness in this region and the effort to obtain an accurate count of the homeless population.

By STEPHANIE PORTER-NICHOLS/Staff

Counting the homeless man who lives near the Atkins exit and the people housed in Crossroads Shelter is easy, but the faces of the homeless are becoming more diverse and more challenging to tally. Individuals sacking out on the couch with family and friends or living in an old trailer without heat or water may not consider themselves homeless, but they are. Despite the obstacles, getting an accurate total of the regional homeless population is the goal of local service providers who link it to aid money.

"People can identify with the person under the bridge or staying in a homeless shelter, but some of the other scenarios don't come to mind. They aren't 'homeless' because they have a roof over their head," said Pat Helton, who is the executive director of Crossroads Shelter for the homeless in Wytheville.

At the same time, individuals fear the stigma associated with homelessness. "They don't want that label," said Helton.

However, with the far-reaching effects of the ongoing recession, Helton hopes that people realize the stigma isn't what it once was and will come forward to be counted and potentially receive assistance.

"Maybe this is the time, maybe this is the economic climate that will allow people to come forward without shame or guilt to be counted. I certainly hope so. If we are successful, we will be able to access more of the dollars that would be allocated for our area."

With the difficulties of counting the homeless, Helton believes in past years this region's population has been under reported during the annual count, which takes place toward the end of January each year and is federally required. The count is, said Helton, "directly linked to the amount of funding we will receive to help alleviate the problem in our area."

That funding is needed.

Andy Kegley, executive director of H.O.P.E. Inc., a regional non-profit addressing poverty issues, noted that as part of a \$547,000 grant of federal stimulus funds, \$71,000 was available to help people with rent and utility crises. Within the first week, all of that money was obligated to 54 families.

Another installment will be available Feb. 1, and Kegley said, "We will have a massive amount of folks here."

He added, "We thought \$547,000 was a lot of money. We're pretty much convinced that we could have used the whole grant in the current quarter."

Kegley also cited the issue of families and friends doubling up. He recalled the circumstances of a family he worked with around Thanksgiving. According to Kegley, the husband had lost his job, then the couple and their toddler lost their home and were forced to move in with various relatives, eventually finding their way to a first cousin's home in Wytheville.

That first cousin was Mary Boenke. She and her husband, Mark, and three children invited the other family to live in their home's completed basement.

Knowing of her cousin's circumstances and inability to find new employment, Boenke said, they invited the family to house sit for 10 days while they went out of town. When they returned home, she said, they let the other family know they could stay on. They stayed for four months.

Boenke said the situation had advantages for both families. Her children, she believes, had a positive developmental influence on her cousin's 2 year old. Both husband and wife pitched in with chores. He mowed the lawn and did small

repairs. "There was never a dirty dish in my sink," remembered Boenke. Her cousin's family was considerate of their schedule and did their own cooking, she said.

Yet, Boenke also acknowledged it was not all easy. After a while, she said, the children especially began to feel the loss of space.

"They were aware of that.... They felt it was time to move on," she said. When they got part-time work, they rented another space.

The experience has made Boenke aware of how easily individuals can lose homes. "It's very humbling to consider that.... It could happen to anybody." Of her cousin's family a few years ago, she said, "They were doing real well. They had no worries."

For Christmas, Boenke and her family didn't send gifts to family members. They instead made donations to Crossroads Shelter in their honor.

Kegley noted that for the first time Boenke's cousin had to think about food stamps as a reality in his life. He wondered, "How many folks are out there" with similar stories?

He asked that individuals living in doubled-up situations or other circumstances that make them homeless in Smyth, Bland, Wythe, Carroll and Grayson counties and the city of Galax call in between Jan. 25 and 29 to be counted. The numbers to call are toll free 877-818-8680 Ext. 210 or in Wythe County 228-6280 Ext. 210.

He and Helton, who are members of a multi-agency Continuum of Care that's been working for about 12 years, assure potential callers that their information will be kept private and confidential.

"We only want to be able to help the individuals and families in our community. We will be able to do this better and with more resources if we are able to get a more accurate count," concluded Helton.

You can reach Stephanie Porter-Nichols at sportern@wythenews.com or 276-783-5121.