

Homeless on rise in Orange County

By Philissa Cramer, The Herald-Sun
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CHAPEL HILL -- A statewide point-in-time count of the homeless found 236 homeless people in Orange County, but that number doesn't surprise county service providers.

The survey, conducted Dec. 15 and coordinated by the N.C. Interagency Council for Coordinating Homeless Programs, tried to count the number of people living in shelters and on the streets.

County agencies counted 186 individuals in facilities serving the homeless, excluding Freedom House, a drug and alcohol detoxification and recovery center in Chapel Hill. County police officers found 50 nonsheltered people on the streets and other places not intended for human habitation.

The latest numbers represented a 32 percent increase over those of a previous count in February that found 179 homeless people in Orange County.

Chris Moran, executive director of the Inter-Faith Council, said the 236 homeless persons counted last week likely do not represent the county's entire homeless population.

"I know there are more than what was counted," he said. "There always are."

The results of the count don't indicate where nonsheltered individuals were found in the county, but Moran said UNC Police counted 10 people.

Of the other 40 homeless people who weren't staying in shelters, 27 were male and 13 were female, he said.

But Moran said that while the count was not perfectly accurate, county residents could extract important information from it.

"The point-in-time count is done to raise consciousness," not to serve as a reliable measure of the area's true homeless population, he said,

The latest count differs from others that have preceded it because it was part of a statewide effort, not just a local initiative, Moran said.

Counts occurred in many counties in previous years, but the shift to a coordinated statewide effort should make this month's more accurate, IFC officials said.

"Being such a transient population, it's good to do it on the same day" so a given homeless person isn't counted more than once, said Scott Hamer, assistant to the executive director of the Inter-Faith Council.

Moran said the limited number of low-cost housing units in Orange County, coupled with the downturn in the economy, has contributed to an increase in homelessness here.

More people are at risk of becoming homeless, including those who spend more than 50 percent of their income on housing and those who are currently doubled up in units holding more people than they're designed to, he said,

At least 5,500 households in Orange County spend more than 50 percent of their income on housing costs, Moran said. The benchmark for affordability is 30 percent.

Anything above the 30-percent mark indicates residents are more vulnerable to the effects of fluctuations in the economy, job loss or even a cutback in the number of hours worked, he said.

One family Moran described had four children and had two full-time wage earners making \$7.50 per hour at the same company. Both parents have now been laid off, offering "a clear example that makes [the IFC] quite concerned about the number of homeless," he said.

And with a moratorium on Section 8 housing -- rentals subsidized by federal vouchers -- Moran said the situation is likely to get worse before it gets better.

"I don't see any relief in sight from the federal government," he said, adding that state cutbacks in human services make local relief unlikely too.

Still, he said, last week's count should encourage people to focus on the issues of housing and homelessness locally.

"It's hard to take on something at a national level and win that battle," he said.

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