

\$52 million at stake in homeless count

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A small army of volunteers fanned out across the Antelope Valley and other parts of Los Angeles County last week in an effort to find and accurately count the homeless living in the area.

They found people in shelters and on the street. Some lived in cars; others had made homes out of camper shells. For the volunteers sent to count the unaccounted, it was a side of the Valley few notice.

"When you're given a street map and you've lived in the Antelope Valley for 20 years, it is surprising. When you're driving by at 50 you see one thing, and when you drive by at 15 you see something different," said Dianne Grooms, regional vice president of the United Way.

"You get on your own pattern of daily routine, and you don't see it as close as when you're really looking for it. I didn't think we'd find any in the area I was in." What did she find? "Families, that's the surprise," Grooms said. "It's not a crime to be poor, and these people are trying to get by."

The census of the streets is part of a nationwide initiative by the federal Department of Housing and Urban Development, which will hand out \$1.4 billion in grants to local programs that help the homeless. In L.A. County, more than \$52 million is at stake.

"It's going to give us a better feel for the prevalence of homelessness throughout the county," said Siri Khalsa, communications director for the Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority. "A lot of communities don't think they have any homeless, and this will give us some data on that."

The final report for L.A. County, produced by the agency and Applied Survey Research, will detail the number of homeless people who live in the area, as well as their quality of living, habits and services available. The report is due out in June.

The agency, a joint effort of the city and county of Los Angeles, and other aid groups have been operating on past counts that have been nowhere near as thorough.

In 1998, an estimated 1,600 homeless lived in the Antelope Valley, according to Grooms. An "extremely informal" count last spring tallied 3,500 people without shelter.

The most recent countywide tally estimated 84,000 homeless throughout the L.A. basin. That number came from a complicated formula of welfare roles, poverty rates, use of public services and other factors.

"We could only guess on the number of homeless by the amount who come to services and say they are homeless," Grooms said. "There are a lot of folks who will not come and ask for services. They'll hide out."

Grooms canvassed Green Valley and Lake Hughes with a 65-year-old homeless man. The agency paid homeless workers \$10 per hour to help with the count, figuring that those who are or have been homeless would know of areas that other volunteers would not.

"We found one couple out on the street who we knew were homeless. The rest were people living in camper shells and things like that. The surprise element is the sheer fact that this area is growing." Grooms said.

Palmdale and Lancaster ban sleeping or camping on public streets. Sheriff's deputies can fine violators or give jail time in some cases.

Palmdale Mayor Jim Ledford said the city works actively to prevent homelessness.

"We at the city probably spend about \$250,000 per year, and we have a combination of monies we draw from," he said.

"These resources that we're applying really keep people from homelessness. We're not necessarily supportive of the lifestyle."

Ledford stressed that addressing homeless issues was really the county's responsibility, but he pointed out that the city still provides funds for services.

The mayor did not expect the count to show a large homeless population in Palmdale.

He said certain homeless advocates have tried to show a larger concentration out of "self interest." Higher numbers of homeless means more resources for agencies, Ledford argued.

"I hope I don't sound cold and callous. Compassion is important in any society," the mayor said. "Our position is we want to help people who want to help themselves."

When the Palmdale City Council approved a sleeping/camping ban in 2002, Ledford warned against building a homeless shelter in the city. "Build it and they will come," he said at the time, a statement he stands by.

"These become self-fulfilling prophecies," Ledford said. This count will help "establish reality."

Grooms said homelessness is not the city's responsibility.

"It's a community issue, but it's a responsibility of the individual homeless person," she said. "It's a choice for the community if we want them walking around or into housing and into a better situation."

She pointed out that 25% of the people coming into service centers are single mothers.

"These are the ones we're really concerned with, because it affects children," Grooms said. "There are some people who choose to be homeless, and that's a lifestyle we don't support."

Palmdale serves hundreds of people every week with food, hotel vouchers and other aid.

"It's important to have services when people are ready to take that step to be independent," Grooms said.

Khalsa has a slightly different view. Her agency was formed in 1993 in a legal settlement between the city and county of Los Angeles. Each entity said the other bore responsibility for helping the homeless, and each accused the other of shortchanging the already downtrodden population.

The agency that came of the settlement is jointly funded by city and county and serves all but two cities and all unincorporated areas.

"In general, homelessness is a local issue," Khalsa said. "Generally, people stay in the area they become homeless in."

She admitted that Los Angeles has unique issues. "Because we have a lot of outlying areas that don't have services, people tend to come down here where there are services. But I don't think the people on skid row in downtown L.A. grew up here, either."

The only real snag in the count so far were the overwhelming number of volunteers who came out to participate.

"The major challenge that we're dealing with is that we've got so many people who want to help," Khalsa said. "We put the word out that we want current homeless people to help, and we're paying them. People want to work."

Grooms said that the count "really couldn't have been accomplished without all the volunteers we had this morning."

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