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Census of homeless aimed at preserving funding

By Dana Bartholomew

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Friday, January 21, 2005 - Hoping to preserve millions in federal funds and better track help for the homeless, volunteers will comb the streets next week for a first-ever tally of Los Angeles County transients.

More than 800 volunteers from the Los Angeles Homeless Service Authority will conduct the nighttime count from Tuesday through Thursday in area shelters, jails, hospitals and neighborhoods in more than 500 census tracts.

The data will be supplemented by a survey next month of 3,300 transients and a telephone survey to assess those at risk of becoming homeless.

"This is the first count we've done," said Robin Conerly, a spokeswoman for the LAHSA. "It's important to determine the level of homelessness in the county so we can target money in the right direction and so we can understand if we're reducing homelessness."

The project, paid for by a \$350,000 grant from the city and the county, was mandated by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development.

Results of the homeless count and surveys are expected to be released in June. In the San Fernando, Santa Clarita and Antelope valleys, volunteers will fan out at 9 p.m. Tuesday from centers in Newhall, San Fernando, Pacoima, North Hollywood, Lancaster and Palmdale.

In addition to shelters, volunteers will seek homeless residents in parks and streets, under bridges and in known hangouts for the down-and-out.

Los Angeles Mayor James Hahn, Councilwoman Wendy Greuel and other elected officials have volunteered to participate in the late-night tally.

"It's important because federal dollars are allocated based on the number of homeless in your county or city," said Greuel, who will canvass her district in

North Hollywood. "We need money. In the San Fernando Valley, we have more homeless than we've had in the past."

The homeless count is aimed to establish a baseline tally, demographics on homelessness, track progress of outreach programs and preserve \$52 million in federal funds for homelessness in the greater Los Angeles region.

Previous estimates of area homeless were culled from census and government records. Studies show that on any given night, 84,000 people throughout the county are homeless, while more than 236,000 are homeless at some time during the year.

"We're seeing larger families with older kids," said John Horn, spokesman for Los Angeles Family Housing, a shelter with 520 single and family clients in North Hollywood. "The high cost of housing, losing income, they're just losing it."

Horn cautioned that, as a homeless advocate, he's concerned that the count could underrepresent the number of county homeless residents.

"For some reason, if the numbers come back (short)," he said, "people might not think there's value in putting money and services toward the problem."

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