

Surveyors Seek Out Valley's Homeless

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Scouts spread out across the Santa Clarita Valley searching for homeless late Tuesday and early Wednesday in a bid to put together a comprehensive countywide count of the displaced.

The numbers were deemed too raw to release, said a spokeswoman for the Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority.

Surveyors, many of whom were or had been transients themselves, counted people who appeared homeless but were not necessarily confirmed as such. LAHSA officials instructed them not to approach any subjects.

The census takers also counted cars, vans and recreational vehicles that apparently served as shelters. However, their searches yielded little in the way of human sightings, perhaps because of the wet weather, some speculated.

Some of the groups found none and others claimed a handful.

A formerly homeless man said most don't want to be found.

"Once you resign yourself to nothingness ... you stay inside yourself," said Peter Starks, 56, who said he'd been a homeless drug-and-alcohol abuser for 30 years. "It's a lonely existence."

Amber Morino, 18, and Regina Drummond, 46, found one homeless man during their four-hour tour, which was punctuated by out-of-car excursions.

At about 9 p.m. on Tuesday, they were among a drably clad group of surveyors who studied a map of the valley's streets that had been taped onto the white walls of the Santa Clarita Valley Service Center.

They were sorely outnumbered — about 12 people were available to pair off on the 15 routes that needed to be scoured. In other areas, the \$10-per-hour stipend drew far more "volunteers" than were needed, said LAHSA spokeswoman Siri Khalsa.

The ideal number of scouts was about two per route, she said.

At about 9:15 p.m., Drummond and Morino, armed with clipboards filed into cars and began cruising the streets. They used pencils to tally their counts of the homeless on forms, classifying them by gender and whether they were adults.

Morino said she was homeless for most of her 18 years. Drummond was a senior LAHSA emergency services worker, who, nearly two decades ago, was forced to live in her car in the heart of Hollywood for almost a year.

But the single find during the exhaustive search could have been attributed to several factors, Drummond said.

"I wish I would have known more like exactly where the encampments were," she said. "In a lot of the areas, also, that were chosen I guess at random, they were residential tracts."

Much of their driving time was spent navigating through affluent neighborhoods in Sand Canyon and Valencia. But the pair tallied one homeless man whom they found at the Santa Clarita Metrolink Station.

A trek along a riverbed in Newhall revealed no signs of inhabitants — though a person lying among or behind brush in the blackness could have escaped Drummond's senses.

Morino, who said she was tired and out-of-shape, stayed in Drummond's sport utility vehicle during the latter exploration.

But the 18-year-old said she thinks there are many more homeless foster youths than most people would imagine. Legally homeless like Morino, the youths float from foster home to foster home. She said she's lived in dozens of homes, the longest stint being 2 1/2 years.

"Most of the (homeless) teenagers live with their friends," she said.

The majority of the other scouts said they had participated or planned to participate in several of LAHSA's surveys in different areas over the course of the three-night project. More than half of them said they were homeless in the Antelope Valley but were familiar with Santa Clarita.

Others, like 51-year-old Darlene Waters, were more familiar with San Francisco and her current habitat: downtown Los Angeles.

Waters has been homeless since last April.

"I'm ashamed of my situation, but who wants to help?" she said. "I got this job because I swore I was going to have one by the end of the week."

In all, the homeless census process is estimated to cost \$350,000.

A years-old city estimate puts the number of homeless men, women and children within Santa Clarita city limits at 170. A LAHSA spokeswoman said the group of surveyors was too small for the ground it had to cover, so they broke into teams of two and took on several routes.

From the Newhall starting point, the surveyors drove throughout the valley and to Sylmar. They only rarely left their cars to scout on foot because of the vastness of the area they were asked to cover.

The numbers were too unrefined to release to the public; a nonprofit consulting firm, Applied Survey Research, will process the numbers into an equation and combine them with another 400 to 500 over-the-phone surveys, Khalsa said.

The survey, which covered the entire county, fulfilled a requirement for LAHSA to receive \$55 million in federal aid.

However, no matter how high or low, the census would have no effect on the amount of money the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development would give to LAHSA, Khalsa said — it only matters that the count gets done.

"It's for other things (than the money), too," she said. "It's so we can get a better understanding of the population we serve county-wide."

LAHSA is a joint-government organization between Los Angeles County and all its cities except Pasadena, Long Beach and Glendale.