

Volunteers look for ways to improve future counts

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February 8, 2020

Publication: Palatka Daily News (FL)

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Word Count: 574

The increase in the number of homeless residents could mean an increase of funding for Putnam County, but improvements can still be made for next year, said local officials who performed a count of the homeless in January.

The homeless population rose from 26 in 2019 to 523 this year, Lori Shaw, coordinator of the count and administrative assistant for SMA Healthcare. Although 497 more people were found, there were still residents who couldn't be reached.

The Point in Time count happened Jan. 30 and 31. More than 20 volunteers surveyed Putnam County to count homeless residents for the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development.

"Overall, (volunteers) did great," Shaw said. "I'm happy. We did really good."

Things that could be improved for next year include gathering numbers from Putnam Community Medical Center, working closer with food banks and being able to reach out to the Spanish-speaking community, officials said.

The number of homeless people at the hospital couldn't be counted because there was not enough time to gather the information. A survey from HUD was requested in Spanish to reach the Hispanic community, but the survey was never sent, Shaw said.

SMA Healthcare employee Jennifer Young said she tried to reach out to churches and people from the Hispanic population, but most were afraid to come forward.

"It's going to take building relationships," Young said.

Efforts to help the homeless will not stop with the count. Donations are still coming in and those who need items are still being given bags filled with toiletries, water and food, Shaw said.

Out of the more than 500 homeless residents counted, one of those was William Hawkins Jr., known to volunteers as "Hawk." He has been homeless for two years, living in a shed near Crill Avenue in Palatka. The property owner said Hawkins has permission to live there, but he doesn't

want to move. He wants to be left alone, he said.

Hawkins is a veteran, serving in the military from 1980 to 1984. He went to the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga to study forensic archaeology but didn't graduate because he needed English and foreign language credits, he said.

He spent ages 12 to 15 in and out of juvenile detention and living on the streets until he was emancipated. He said he became homeless again because his mother died and he couldn't afford to keep the house.

"I'm an outstanding survivor and I've survived most of my life," he said. "The only problem with that is I never learned how to live."

His hands shake from Parkinson's, he has post-traumatic stress disorder and he was once treated for bipolar disorder, none of which he is treated for now, he said.

"Home is where I'm at," he said. "I live within myself. ... I have no ambitions beyond that because I'm not going to live much longer," the 55-year-old said.

The Point in Time count will continue next year because there are more homeless residents to be found, Shaw said.

"That's the biggest part of this ... making connections with all of the churches in the area and with the homeless themselves so they see (our faces) and know (we're) not going steer them wrong," Shaw said. "(We're) trying to help."

For more information on how to help or donate, email Shaw at lshaw@smhhealthcare.com

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