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Grueling, early morning count collects vital data on county's homeless

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About 1,600 volunteers throughout San Diego County walked down dark streets, peered into vehicle windows, drove through neighborhoods and walked unmarked trails in the pre-dawn hours Thursday in an annual effort to learn more about the area's homeless population.

"Good morning," Father Joe's Villages outreach supervisor Miguel Figueroa said while standing outside a tent on a sidewalk in downtown San Diego. "Would you like to take a survey this morning? We're just going to ask you a couple of questions."

The person inside grumbled, then relented. In exchange for his time, he received a 7-Eleven gift card for \$10 and a pair of socks from Figueroa, one of 35 Father Joe's staff members participating in the count.

Similar scenes played out across the county from 4 a.m. until dawn in the annual ritual, a requirement of the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development for all communities that receive federal funding for homeless programs.

The survey never has been considered an exact science and generally is accepted as an undercount. The data collected can help service providers and officials from cities and the county identify trends and needs of different groups. A report on the size and demographics of homeless populations in each city will be released in about four months.

Before those numbers are crunched, however, comes the grueling task of finding people willing to share their information.

In South County, Chula Vista's homeless outreach team ventured into one of the city's darkest and largest undeveloped areas, colloquially known as "The Jungle."

Concealed in the thick of the swath of vegetation between Plaza Bonita Road and Interstate 805 were intricate homeless camps built with anything from tarps to scrap wood. The elaborate structures have chain-link fences, working porch light fixtures and doorbells. For many, The Jungle offers space to live away from the sight and buzz of the world.

Outreach teams and case managers who regularly visit the area know many there on a first-name basis. On this morning, however, their greetings often went unanswered, as many camps appeared abandoned following the recent rainstorms.

“Rosy, is that you?” case manager Diana Irias said after hearing a voice from inside one tent. It was Rosy, but her voice sounded off, sickly and with a heavy cough. Irias said the 66-year-old had become homeless during the pandemic after losing her apartment and had moved into a Palm Avenue shelter, which she recently left for The Jungle.

Irias set a locator pin on her cellphone to remember where Rosy was staying, hoping to find and help her once more.

Several yards away, the team asked a man if he would take the survey.

“Do you have a jacket?” he asked from inside his tent. He was offered a \$10 McDonald’s gift card, prompting him to step outside his encampment and thank the team before returning inside.

Those who answered had mixed experiences on becoming homeless. Some had lost their jobs and became homeless for the first time in recent months, while others have called The Jungle home for years.

Most counters were volunteers who signed up through the San Diego Regional Task Force on Homelessness, which organized the point-in-time count, but others included politicians and paid county workers. Areas with some of the largest homeless populations were handled by professional outreach workers, including staff members from Father Joe’s Villages, the Alpha Project and People Assisting the Homeless.

A team from Father Joe’s Villages walked the streets of East Village, where the homeless population has soared in recent months. A monthly count conducted by the Downtown San Diego Partnership found 1,839 people living on sidewalks or in vehicles in the area one night in December, the fifth straight month of a record high.

Some from Father Joe’s Villages had only worked desk jobs and were meeting homeless people on the street for the first time.

“What are the three golden rules of being an outreach worker?” residential services supervisor Jesus Montes asked Figueroa.

“Don’t take anything personally,” Figueroa answered. “Expect rejection. And never give up.”

The team of five passed rows of tents along Imperial Avenue and around the blocks of 16th and 17th streets, at times conducting interviews with unseen people who spoke from behind their canvas shelters. Sometimes there were no answers when counters approached, leaving the tents uncounted.

Team member Austin Van Hoy came upon a man in a tent who said he had several untreated medical issues. Although the man had been homeless four years, Van Hoy said he did not know Father Joe’s has a medical clinic about a block away. The exchange

revealed how people on the street sometimes do not know about resources available to them.

Michael Pollard, 62, has been homeless about two years and was interviewed on 17th Street. Life on the street isn't too bad, he said, except when he leaves his tent and returns to find he has been robbed.

He uses cocaine and drinks alcohol, but said he stays away from heavy drug users.

"It's not fun like I used to think it was," he said.

Pollard said he has used fentanyl four times by accident, and its effects the first time left him so panicked he asked for an ambulance.

"I'd find a pipe on the ground, thinking it was full of what I like, but it'd be fentanyl," he said.

Figueroa said outreach workers on his team have recently encountered more people overdosing on drugs.

In East County, a small team from San Diego River Park Foundation hiked through Old Man's Pond on county land that borders Santee. The foundation has found hundreds of people living along the San Diego River, but many of the known sites appeared to have been evacuated when the team set out to find them.

After more than an hour of largely fruitless searching, the team led by the foundation's volunteer program manager Shane Conta approached the edge of a small hill.

At first glance, a pile of dried palm fronds looked like they had just fallen from a tree. But a closer look showed they formed a small entryway.

Conta bent over and stepped inside the tunnel, rustling some branches.

"Hey, whoa, whoa," said a voice.

Conta backed up.

After a moment, a bearded man emerged in a hoodie and cargo pants. He introduced himself as 34-year-old Scott Lawson and said he'd been homeless on and off for about a decade.

Lawson pointed toward two shopping carts parked closer to the water.

"This whole valley filled up," he said. He counted himself lucky: The fronds had mostly kept him dry.

A little ways away, volunteers called out to a tent surrounded by bushes.

A man in his 40s, Michael Bishop, stepped out and sat down on a couch, yawning.

He gestured toward a dirt path. He'd recently been sleeping further down the slope when the rain started, he said. The water rose several feet, pushing him to his current spot.

He asked about the status of a new ordinance in Santee largely making it illegal to camp or start fires by the corridor. The City Council approved the rules Wednesday and they take effect in 30 days, although the Sheriff's Department has said it is still weighing how best to enforce it.

Bishop was pessimistic about his options.

"I don't feel I could afford even a studio apartment with a full-time, minimum-wage job," he said.

Conta later mentioned to the group that he and his girlfriend were also looking for an apartment.

They had multiple degrees between them and good credit, he said. But their last application had just been rejected.

In North County, volunteers and members of the Oceanside Police Department's homeless outreach team approached a tarp on the corner of Mission Avenue and El Camino Real. A man with short hair and a battered face poked his head out of a pile of blankets.

"I want to get off the street," said the man, who identified himself as a Marine Corps veteran and former sniper. "I can't stay on the street. I move around, but I move around to stay away from idiots."

As he spoke with two volunteers, he slowly opened his eyes, became more awake and asked what day it was. He talked a bit about drugs and mental health, and agreed to discuss helpful services if they would return later.

Others sleeping outdoors in the cold were not so cooperative.

Nearby, at the corner of Foussat Road and state Route 76, officers with the homeless outreach team tried to connect volunteers with a woman named Pamela, who was in her usual spot in a gully behind Fire Station No. 7, but not willing to talk or accept any help.

"You know how it is with Pamela," one officer said. "She will not give you any information. She will just start screaming."

A tall man wrapped in a blanket, standing on the sidewalk outside Brother Benno's on Production Avenue, declined to answer an interviewer's questions. He was among dozens of people waiting for the nonprofit group to open and begin its daily distribution of food, clothing and other necessities.

"There's too much going on with me," he said. "I'm going through some stuff."

Battered old cars, vans and recreational vehicles were parked for blocks around in the industrial park that includes the homeless services provider. Many of the vehicles were homes on wheels. More than one building had a tent erected in the doorway. People pushed shopping carts loaded with personal belongings along the sidewalks.

Police Sgt. Nate Brazelton had advised all volunteers to be cautious before heading out at 4 a.m.

"If somebody doesn't want to talk to you, just let them go," said Brazelton, a member of the department's outreach team. "Don't wake them up."

In downtown San Diego, Scott Manning had volunteered to participate in the count with the Father Joe's Villages team and said the experience was eye-opening.

"I came across some people, and I was amazed at how gentle and kind they were, but living in such a difficult environment," said Manning, a business professor at San Diego State University. "But on the other side, you could see some who were truly struggling and failing, and it just breaks your heart. So it's from a heartwarming experience to a heartbreaking experience."

Manning said he now had a greater understanding of the count's importance.

"I always thought of the count as just a count," he said. "It's numbers. But it's not. It really identifies what are the needs out there, and who are they, and can we get those resources to them. It totally makes more sense to me now."

San Diego City Council and Board of Supervisors members who participated in the count held a downtown news conference to share their experiences, and many also said the event is emotional and eye-opening. Supervisor Joel Anderson said he was impressed with the many volunteers who participated, but was saddened to see some of the people he met in last year's count were still on the street.

San Diego City Councilmember Raul Campillo said the count is a reminder to treat all people with dignity.

"This should not be the only day that we look a person who is experiencing homeless in the face and ask them how they're doing, what their name is, what they're interested in and if they want help," he said. "We shouldn't be walking past homeless individuals and ignoring them. Look them in the eye. Say, 'Good morning.' Say, 'Good evening.' Ask them how they're doing."

A count from last February found 8,427 homeless people throughout the county, a 10 percent increase from the previous count of 2020, with just over half in shelters. The other 4,100 were living outside, a 3 percent increase from 2020. The count was not conducted in 2021 because of the pandemic.