

Homeless: Some local help is available

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"That's why we find a lot of individuals living in cars or doubling up with other family members, or going back and forth between here and Salem," Bornfleth said.

This flux makes the exact number of people who live homeless or without adequate shelter in our area hard to nail down.

Each year, a homeless count is done in one day. Last year, 1,815 people were counted on the streets and shelters of Polk and Marion counties on Jan. 29. But that leaves many uncounted.

Dallas (23 students homeless in 2014), Perrydale (no homeless) and Falls City (14 school districts did not add their student homeless counts to the totals. Central reported 75 homeless students during the one-day count. From the time the count was taken in January 2014 to the time the Oregon Department of Education released its homeless student figures in fall of 2014, Central's numbers had climbed to 93 students.

Polk County Jail was unable to complete surveys for the 2014 count because of time constraints.

Another factor in counting the county's transients is the definition of homeless.

Define 'homeless'

The federal government has one standard of homelessness, whereas the county has another, both of which are different from the definition used by schools, said Herm Boes, who has served in numerous community outreach programs, including the Polk County Commission for Children and Families Board of Directors, which helped launch Polk Community Connect.

"If you look at Marion-Polk counties, if you're couch-surfing, you're homeless," Boes said. "If you lost a job or you're forced to live with relatives or whatever, you're homeless, because you didn't choose to live with those relatives."

People living in cars or substandard housing also are considered homeless by the county's definition, Boes said. One example Boes noted of substandard housing is Green Haven RV Park in Falls City, depending on the quality of life in each individual trailer. Some trailers may have adequate heating, water and electricity, while others may not.

In spite of the multitude of definitions, efforts continue to get more accurate numbers for the homeless.

"What we keep trying to do is get more accurate numbers, regardless of what the federal government requires," Boes said. "That's why we do the street count and that's why we try to find out more of what's going on in different shelters."

But that can get tricky, too, because the rules and definitions continue to change, he said.

"If someone is staying someplace for a reason other than homelessness, we can't count them as homeless," Boes said.



AARON YOST/for the Itemizer-Observer

Margaret Merritt lives in a motor home in Green Haven RV Park. She knows others consider her homeless, but does not see herself that way.

In Need Of Assistance?

The fact that Polk County does not have emergency shelters makes it more difficult to find and help those who are homeless or who are at risk of being homeless. Most of the homeless in Polk County do not look like the stereotype, and may be couch-surfing, living in a garage or car, or sheltered in a motor home.

That does not mean homelessness does not exist in Polk County, and that there are no resources.

For those in need of assistance, the best place to start would be the Academy Building, 182 SW Academy St., Dallas (corner of Main and Academy streets), where a multitude of agencies work in the same proximity to aid families and individuals with things including rent, paying utilities, finding work and getting clothes. Remember: it's easier to stay in a home than it is to get one after becoming homeless.

Call the Polk County Service Integration Team at 503-623-9664 before it gets to the point where you are on the streets.

Many churches and organizations provide food for those in need. James2 Community Kitchen offers a weekly meal every Tuesday from 4:30 to 6 p.m. at St. Philip Catholic Church, 825 SW Mill St., Dallas. See the Polk County Itemizer-Observer's weekly community calendar listing for other food banks and free meal opportunities.

For example, if someone is using Shangri-La, an emergency shelter in Salem for those with developmental or intellectual disabilities and their families, they cannot be counted among homeless in Marion-Polk counties, Boes said. Because the shelter may get money from the federal government to assist those with mental illness, even though they may be homeless, they are no longer counted among



EMILY MENTZER/Itemizer-Observer

At the annual Polk Community Connect event, more than 300 homeless or people at risk of becoming homeless had a chance to choose some free items.

"Once you get into that realm, it's hard to get out."

— Jason Littleton, Falls City, on the issue of homelessness



the homeless.

As if that weren't confusing enough, individuals may have an entirely different definition about being homeless.

"I was homeless for six months," said Wayne Crowder, founder of Serving Our Veterans At Home (SOVAH). "I was in a travel trailer, didn't have water, didn't have electricity, but I didn't consider myself homeless. I had a roof over my head."

Others, like Margaret Merritt, knows the county considers her homeless, but she does not see herself that way.

Merritt has lived at Green Haven RV Park for three years and owns her mobile home trailer.

"I have a roof over my head," she said. "It's an old motor home, I could stand to have a newer one, but this will do."

Crowder, who participat-

ed in the first Polk County street count with Boes eight years ago, was saddened and surprised by how many homeless in the area were veterans.

"Most veterans, especially the younger ones, don't consider themselves homeless if they're sleeping on an uncle's couch," he said. "They don't understand homeless is when you're not in control of where you're residing. When you're living with somebody, you're homeless."

Help is available

Polk County has many services for those who are homeless — or who are at risk of becoming homeless.

It's much easier to keep someone in their home than to find them a home once they lose it, Boes said.

The Polk County Resource Center provides a sort of

one-stop shop for families in trouble, Bornfleth said.

"What we're really trying to do is make it a more effective process for families, so they can come here, fill out one form and we can say, 'what are you looking for today, what can we help with?'" she said. "And they're going to get referred to and/or meet with somebody who can talk to them about a variety of services."

But once a home is lost, there really is no place to go in Polk County.

A phone call to Salem Interfaith Hospitality Network — one of the only transitional home programs available for a complete family — reveals the shelter program is full.

"In December, we turned away 43 families," said T.J. Putman, executive director for the hospitality network. "July 1 through Oct. 15, we turned away 142."

Putman said that, in spite of a recovering economy, homelessness in Polk County is about the same as it has been.

"The gap between income and the cost of rent is still too high," he said, adding that the lack of adequate shelter space, affordable

housing and working-class jobs all contribute to the problems.

Even the definition of working-class job is subjective, said Pat O'Connor, regional economist with the Oregon Employment Department.

"That's always one of the challenges of looking at wages," he said. "Everything depends on what kind of household you are."

A single adult with no children may have no problem living off a low-wage job, whereas someone who has a spouse and two children to support may struggle to live off \$15 an hour, as suggested by House Bill 2009 and Senate Bill 610.

House Bill 2009 has been introduced in the Oregon Legislature by Rep. Rob Nosse (D-Portland) which will, if passed, increase Oregon's minimum wage to \$15 an hour by 2018. Senate Bill 610 has the same goal and outcome, sponsored by Sen. Chip Shields (D-Portland).

Also, low-paying jobs are often ones that do not require specific skills, meaning those people may be considered easily replaced, O'Connor said.

For San Hewitt, the job market isn't the tough part — he said the jobs are out there — but getting the medical attention he needs to fix his teeth so he will feel comfortable enough to go back to work is not easy.

"We try to stay positive," San said. "There are a plethora of resources here, but without an address — a lot of stuff we can get we need an address (first)."

To qualify for the Oregon Health Plan, so that he can get the dental care he needs to fix his teeth and go back to work, San first needs an address. But without a job, he cannot secure an address — or a job.

Prospective employers judge folks without addresses, San said.

"Just because you're homeless doesn't mean you're dirty or a drug addict or a criminal. Sometimes it's just a condition of circumstances," he said.

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