

PROJECT HOMELESS CONNECT

Bringing services to those who need them most

About 1,000 people in Clatsop County are homeless

By Katherine Lacaze
Seaside Signal

In recent years, Clatsop County's homeless population has remained at about 1,000 people, indicating a systemic issue Clatsop Community Action and other local agencies, organizations and businesses are trying to address.

Clatsop Community Action partners with other agencies to gather a census of people who are homeless in the county during the last 10 days of January. It is held in conjunction with the annual Project Homeless Connect Jessica Maclay Memorial, which took place for the seventh year Thursday, Jan. 28, at the Seaside Civic and Convention Center.

During the event, more than 40 nonprofit, governmental and faith-based agencies provided services on site — including medical screenings, immunizations, haircuts, personal care items, clothing vouchers and a hot meal — and connected participants to housing, mail service, food stamps, identification, Social Security, mental health services, employment, education and legal aid.

Clatsop County Community Action Director Elaine Bruce stressed the importance of collecting data on the countywide homeless population according to state and federal standards. The information is reported to the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development and other agencies and affects legislative budgets, Bruce said.

In 2013, the county's homeless population jumped to 1,038 — up 62 percent from the previous year. The number then stabilized. The count was 1,047 in 2014 and 1,005 in 2015. The agency expects the number will be about 1,000 this year, as well.

While the count has remained nearly stagnant, "the face of homelessness is changing," said Suzanne Evans, crisis and mental health case manager at Helping Hands Re-entry Outreach Centers. The Seaside-based nonprofit agency was a partner at the event and provided clothing, shoes and cold-weather accessories to participants.

In particular, seniors and households with children are being more affected. In 2015, the 617 households counted included 278 people younger than 18.

"It used to be, years ago, mostly single men; then it transitioned to women, and then women with children," Bruce said.

Staff member Viviana Matthews agreed, saying



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Holly Shepherd, from Salon Boheme, cuts Roger McMoubrey's hair at a station during the Project Homeless Connect event at the Seaside Civic and Convention Center Thursday.

they still see "the chronically homeless," but have seen more families come through. Evans, who made appointments for people to sign up for health insurance, said she believed this year's event brought in a lot of new faces. Close to 150 households attended this year's Project Homeless Connect, according to Matthews.

Overcoming barriers

Clatsop County has tight resources and does not have many employment opportunities, Bruce said, especially those that provide living wages. Some people move to the area misinformed about the job opportunities or unaware of how the job market is seasonal, Matthews said. She feels local agencies and the media are doing a good job bringing awareness of homelessness in Clatsop County, but that also may be why some people see it as more of a problem.

Housing, personal habits, lack of marketable skills and numerous other situations contribute to the issue. As the disabled veteran's outreach and placement specialist with the Oregon Employment Department, Patrick Preston sees numerous barriers affecting veterans as they search for jobs. Often they have skills but not always those needed in today's job market. The same goes for many senior citizens, said Theresa Medina, participant assistant for Experience Works. Medina and Preston said their agencies, as well as Pacific Northwest Works and other



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Bags of toiletries sit on a table for people to take during the Project Homeless Connect event at the Seaside Civic and Convention Center Thursday.

groups, help job candidates receive training, hone skill sets relevant in the local job market and perfect resumes and interview strategies.

"The Employment Department isn't going to get you a job," Preston said. "What we will do is prepare the environment for success."

Medina agreed seniors have become more at-risk for homelessness. Many are not as computer literate and technology savvy as may be required, and they sometimes resist change.

"You get them out of their comfort zone and they don't want to be there," Medina said.

It takes a village

The Astoria Rescue Mission, which has partnered for the event since its genesis, emphasizes building a support system around those in need. The faith-based nonprofit provides a homeless shelter, food and clothing — items to meet people's immediate physical needs. Their mission

also includes a six-month discipleship program, daily Bible studies, services and other programs to satisfy spiritual needs, according to office manager Robert Warriner.

"When they find people to care about them and their needs, it becomes a family," House Manager Bill Eckstein said.

Alisha Luck, a field program assistant with event newcomer Family and Community Together Oregon, also sees how important it is for "underserved" community members to network and find support. The organization assists those with disabilities by providing education and opportunities to network with others in similar circumstances. As the proverb goes, Luck said, "It takes a village to raise a child," and the "family networking piece is that key."

Speaking from experience, Luck said that when she was homeless and raising a daughter with disabili-



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Kathleen Idzal, right, a nursing student at Clatsop Community College, takes Maria Adams' blood pressure during Project Homeless Connect at the Seaside Civic and Convention Center.

ties, she felt cut off from a lot of important information. Newcomers to the area also may experience a disconnect.

Project Homeless Connect's value, she said, is it links people to the services,

resources and information they need, or even those they did not realize they needed.

According to Evans, "It's nice to see us all come together" to give people the referrals and resources they need "in one fell swoop."

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