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COMMUNITIES

More than a basic count: Homeless census helps Summit County groups deliver crucial aid



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Community Support Services case workers Zack Brown and Courtney Seymour trudged through the rain and snow Tuesday morning as they made their way to a homeless encampment in the woods behind The Word Church on Brittain Avenue.

Brown, who has worked with CSS for two years, called out to the tent's occupant, letting the individual know homeless outreach workers were outside and checking in to see if everything was OK. After a few moments and no response, Brown left a backpack filled with snacks, gloves, bus passes and McDonald's gift cards and continued on to the next encampment.

"A tricky thing about coming out this early is people may be sleeping and not want to be bothered, or they may be out and about," Brown said. "But for the most part, people are open and receptive to us if we can reach them."

Brown and Seymour are two of dozens of workers for the annual Point-in-Time (PIT) Count in Summit County, where homeless outreach workers and volunteers conduct a census of homeless individuals who stay in shelters or out on the street. The Summit County Continuum of Care (CoC) is designated by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development to conduct the counts every January to determine the amount of funds and resources allocated to various homeless outreach groups.

Mobile showers for the needy: Mobile shower facility will lead the way for 'caravan of love' serving Akron area's needy

A number of local organizations, including CSS as well as resident volunteers, help CoC conduct the homeless census.

"These PIT Counts are being conducted nationwide today, and the county is going to analyze the data and get some sort of census for what the numbers are and how they've changed over the last year or few years," Brown said. "I know last year the count was over 450, and that number has tripled from 2019 — so it is apparent the homeless issue is getting worse in our county."

"We've seen the rise in homeless individuals in our line of work, and I'm sure people who aren't necessarily performing outreach have been seeing more people out on the streets as well," Brown said.

Seymour's outreach work with CSS has opened her eyes to the issue of homelessness in Akron.

"It's a lot more in depth than you would think; people are just stuck out here and get so enthralled with being homeless and the freedom of it — it's almost become a lifestyle for some people," she said. "Some people don't know how to live inside; a lot don't, it seems like."

CSS and other organizations want to get resources and information to the surrounding homeless communities, but some people don't want to take advantage of the services or get help, falling quickly out of housing, according to Brown.

"One of our main goals is getting people off the streets and housed if that's what they want," he said. "We see a lot of success, but we see some failures too — with people not lasting, some people fail out of housing in a matter of weeks and return to homelessness."

Brown said far more outreach to the encampments occurs than the annual PIT Count days, and that the staff already has connections and rapport with a good percentage of the individuals they come across while conducting the census.

"We go out in the community almost every day, trying to engage with people, getting them to doctor's appointments — this is kind of all in a day's work for us," Brown said.

Warming centers: Summit Lake Community Center extends hours to provide warming center during winter blast

The two CSS workers continued their census journey from the Word Church to other Akron encampments, running into a few individuals who were holed up in their tents trying to escape the rain, and encouraging them to make use of CSS services.

"If people want to take showers or do their laundry or get mail sent [to CSS] or help with acquiring important documents, that is what we are here for; these counts are for more than just seeing who is in the area, it's about reminding people that we are trying to help, we want to help," Brown said.

Akron's emergency shelter saves homeless people from frigid temperatures

This past month has seen low temperatures across Summit County that can be deadly for individuals without shelter. One place where homeless people can go to escape the biting cold is the Emergency Overnight Shelter run by David Churbock, director of the Peter Maurin Center.

The shelter at 111 E. Voris St. is open from 7 p.m. to 8 a.m. when temperatures drop under 15 degrees. The shelter has been in place since December 2020 at property owned by Community Support Services — and Churbock said the number of overnighters has increased every winter since then.

"We ran an emergency shelter over at the Peter Maurin Center for seven years, and then in 2020, COVID hit and we didn't have any room for physical or social distancing," Churbock said. "With funding from Summit Continuum of Care and this space provided by Community Support Services, we were able to establish this emergency overnight shelter."

"Two years ago, the most we had stay overnight was 27 people. Last year, 46 people was our highest count, but so far this year, the most we've had is 73 people — and we can only fit 75 — so that just tells you the number of homeless in the area is rising," Churbock said.

Churbock has seen firsthand the damage these low temperatures can do to the human body when exposed to the elements too long, and he wishes warming centers around Akron would have later hours.

"It's crazy that the warming centers close at 6 or 7 or 8 p.m. Where do the people go at 9 p.m.? I've personally known four people who have had foot trauma this year, people with trench foot or frostbite who have lost their toes or feet due to this cold weather, and I'm just thankful we have an opportunity to help prevent that," Churbock said.

Akron's boundless open office space: Akron needs plan for nearly 2 million square feet of downtown buildings

With a rise of homeless people following the end of a moratorium on evictions and federal COVID-19 funds drying up, Churbock lamented that the emergency overnight shelter is unable to take in more people. One solution he offered is converting some of the empty office space around the city to serve as emergency shelters.

"This is something I've spoken with Mayor Shammus Malik about," Churbock said. "There's over a million square feet of unused office space in the city of Akron. What can we do to grab a couple hundred thousand square feet of that empty space [to convert to shelters]? If we could get organizations like HUD or the Akron Metropolitan Housing Authority to come together and convert some of this empty space, we could get dozens or hundreds more people off the street."

Everyone who stays at the shelter is provided with a blanket, pillow and sleeping mat, as well as a warm meal at night. In the morning, everyone has access to a continental breakfast and is supplied with hand warmers and a bus pass if available. People who stay in the shelter are also provided storage space for their belongings and are given clothes and hygienic products.

People who stay at the shelter must provide their name, birthdate and age upon arrival. The birthdates help differentiate between two individuals with common names, Churbock said. By having a name and a birthdate, these individuals go right to the top of United Way of Summit County's list for help. The shelter provides a roster of the homeless people who stayed at the shelter every night that the shelter is open.

The shelter is staffed by volunteers who work in the evenings from 6:15 to 9:15 p.m. or in the mornings from 6:30 to 8:30 a.m. Volunteers do everything from acting as a receptionist, greeting guests and preparing food and beverages, to assisting the security officer in waking up guests and making sure the guests package their bedding and belongings.

The Peter Maurin Center is a community center that provides help for those who struggle for survival, and has done so since opening in February 2006. Some services the center provides include a food pantry, a hot lunch program, a scholarship fund for Stark State College and a bus pass program for job interviews and medical appointments.

If you are homeless or are at risk of experiencing homelessness and are seeking help, call the Homeless Hotline at 330-615-0577 weekdays between 8 a.m. and 4 p.m.

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