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Takes one to know one?

Survey company counts homeless by hiring many who are or were

EMILY BERG/Staff Writer

VICTORVILLE - Homeless people headed out with clipboards and tally sheets to find others like them throughout the High Desert on Thursday, but most didn't see as many homeless people as expected.

Thirteen people gathered at 5 a.m. at Samaritan's Helping Hand thrift store in Victorville to help conduct a homeless census for San Bernardino County. Some of the volunteers were homeless - or were at one time - while others needed some extra cash.



Darrald Bennett/Staff Photographer

Jennifer Panetta, research analyst for Applied Survey Research, gathers a clipboard from one of the survey workers.

The county paid each person \$10 an hour plus vehicle mileage. It also paid volunteers to complete 1,600 surveys to determine what services homeless people in the area need. The 200 surveys for the High Desert area are already completed. The county paid people \$5 a survey.

The county hopes to get real data from the survey and census that will justify its request for more federal funds, said officials from the San Bernardino County Community Service Department and the Homeless Coalition, who teamed up for the project.

Paul Aguglia, 48, has lived in a vacant lot sleeping under blankets and cardboard in

Victorville for 22 days. He was more familiar with the homeless routine than the 22 days suggest because he lived in his car for about two years from 1993 to 1995.

Aguglia's sales business lost customers. Finally, after only working a few days each month, he didn't have enough money to pay his rent at the end of October.

He heard about the census and survey while getting a meal at the Lord's Supper in early November.

"I could use \$10 an hour," Aguglia said.

Aguglia would like to see more funds for homeless services, including another shelter and a place where people could stop in and get a shower.

"I wish we had come up with more numbers, more people," Aguglia said after the five-hour count. "More people mean more money for next year."

Aguglia counted about 20 homeless people Thursday morning in northern Victorville.

The volunteers went out in teams of two to survey Victorville, Apple Valley and Adelanto. Another team of at least 10 met in Hesperia to cover that portion of the Victor Valley.

Kathleen Kutz, 43, and Sylvia Chavez, 34, thought they would see more people. They counted about 20 people in their area of Apple Valley.

The people aren't out in the morning, Kutz said. Most homeless people don't want to face the day so they sleep late. It's also cold during the night and they sleep better once it warms up.

"When I was homeless I was always out in the afternoon," Kutz said.

Research analyst Jennifer Panetta of Applied Survey Research, the company the county contracted to conduct the census, said the counting took place from 5 to 10 a.m. before the homeless shelters open. Officials will also call for a count of those in the shelters to add to the street count, Panetta said.

"We don't want to double count anyone," Panetta said.

Panetta instructed the volunteers to make a judgment call by looking at the people to determine if they were homeless. She also told them not to worry about talking to the people and to stay safe.

Hiking through the Mojave Narrows and searching condemned buildings wasn't required.

The research company based in Watsonville has conducted homeless counts in about eight other counties. Monterey County received about \$15 million more from federal grants once a census proved it had a greater need than the government's numbers showed, Panetta said.

The 2000 Census counted only 350 homeless people in San Bernardino County, but there are about 3,000 shelter beds, Panetta said.

"We're going to count thousands more than the government did," Panetta said.

Applied Survey Research hopes to release its report of the census and surveys on May 30, Panetta said.