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Census finds more homeless

S.B. COUNTY: Advocates for the poor expect the new numbers will help get programs funded.

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**By MATT SURMAN
THE PRESS-ENTERPRISE**

SAN BERNARDINO - Homeless advocates say that the results from an ambitious countywide census that suggests nearly 25,000 San Bernardino County residents could be homeless in the course of a year will help them in their ongoing search for funding.

The most recent census in November counted 5,270 homeless people during a three-day tally of the county's streets and rural areas. Using information gleaned from a concurrent survey of 1,700 homeless people, analysts believe that between 14,861 to 23,549 are homeless at some point in a year.

The results were unveiled at a presentation Monday for government and nonprofit homeless service providers.

Advocates have argued that previous counts were much too low. The 2000 U. S. census counted 350 homeless people while a 1997 count at homeless shelters came up with 2,254, but did not include people who avoid social services.

'Top priority'

Homeless workers say November's count is necessary to show the needs in the county population to lawmakers and foundations. The number means that between 0.9 percent and 1.3 percent of the county's population experience homelessness, comparable to nationwide figures, analysts said.

The census results should make "ending homelessness a top priority," said Peter Connery, project director for Watsonville-based Applied Survey Research, which led the count and survey.

"Set the lofty goal, realize it's achievable and marshal all your efforts to do that," he told the audience.

Connery's group advised the county to set up a committee to look at the problem, and create a five-year plan delineating how to attack the problem and how much funding would be necessary.

According to the census results, about 324 families -- totaling 1,118 people -- were tallied on the day of the count. About 68 percent of those counted were men. Twenty percent were African American. They account for about 9 percent of the population.

Latinos accounted for 20 percent, although they represent 35 percent of the county's population.

About 14 percent of the county's homeless are children younger than 18. According to the survey, 58 percent had been homeless less than a year.

Surveys indicate that the top three factors reported as the primary cause of homelessness are unemployment -- at 28 percent -- high housing costs, and drug or alcohol use. The top services needed matched those problems, with 32 percent of respondents saying job training and placement was their most important need.

About 67 percent of respondents said they did not receive government assistance, with most of those saying they weren't aware that they were eligible.

Susie Hollenbeck, who heads High Desert Homeless Services in Victorville, said she was initially skeptical that the count would be able to catch many homeless, who often hide out from what they perceive as government intrusion. The count was conducted by homeless advocates and volunteers.

'Good job' credited

"When they did the survey I was worried they wouldn't be effective, but I can see they did a good job," she said.

She said she would take the results to meetings with government leaders. She said police had been rousting homeless people from where they congregate, and haven't been focusing on the underlying problem.

The Rev. David Kalke, who heads Central City Lutheran Mission in San Bernardino, said he was interested in the survey's report that 76 percent had lived in the county for at least three years, and that 49 percent had grown up here.

Some people "believe they're undocumented and transients and that they shouldn't get services."

The report is expected to be released next week, with results available on the Internet in about two weeks, officials said.

Reach Matt Surman at (909)806-3069 or msurman@pe.com

HOMELESS COUNT

For more information about the county's homeless census, see www.sbcounty.gov/csd or www.appliedsurveyresearch.org