

Homelessness put to the count

Hundreds hit the streets to collect tally

By [MARGARET NEW KIRK](#)

The Atlanta Journal-Constitution

The sky was just beginning to get light Tuesday morning when the four men found a homeless encampment along the abandoned railroad tracks and started to laugh.

A temporarily abandoned huddle of cardboard surrounding a backyard barbecue grill, it was perched in the weeds over a view of downtown Atlanta's skyline far better than that from Ponce de Leon lofts a short distance away.

"People probably pay \$2,000 a month for those lofts," said an amused William Malone, a former homeless veteran now eight months clean after a 21-year crack habit. "And the homeless have a better view."

Malone was one of two dozen formerly homeless veterans, two dozen police officers and about 300 volunteers who fanned out across Fulton and DeKalb counties early Tuesday to count homeless people, as part of a nationwide effort to measure homelessness. In metro Atlanta, Cobb County already has done its head count.

The efforts are driven by Congress and the threat of lost federal funding. Congress wants the counts completed by 2004, and could withhold U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development funding from governments that don't comply.

In Atlanta and Fulton and DeKalb counties, more than \$6 million is at stake, although organizers said they would have done the count in any case.

Coordinated by the nonprofit Pathways Inc. of Atlanta, Tuesday's count is just the beginning, said agency executive director Bill Matson. A second survey, including a questionnaire, will begin later this spring, he said.

The count on Tuesday has been in the works for more than a year. This winter, organizers gathered at Manuel's Tavern on Highland Avenue to map out homeless hot spots. Last month, homeless and formerly homeless veterans paced those areas, doing a dry run.

It came together around 1 a.m. Tuesday, when Malone and the other veterans gathered yawning in a small room at the back of the Veteran's Administration hospital in Decatur.

"Ladies and gentlemen, we're on the clock," group leader Dr. Craig Burnette announced as other VA officials passed out reflective vests, flashlights and clipboards, and divided the group into teams.



Mikhail Boutchine / Special

Michael Scott (left) and Freddie Diggs, who both used to be homeless, scoured downtown Atlanta during Tuesday's head count.

Familiar territory

The head count came with its own vocabulary. "Jurassic Park" stands for the wooded areas around the highways running through Atlanta. Police officers combed those. A heroin-infested neighborhood northwest of the Georgia Dome is "the Bluff." "The Beltline" is the stretch of abandoned railroad track that affords the homeless camp a skyline view.

The count began in some of the city's toughest neighborhoods, bridge underpasses and city blocks.

The veterans started in teams of two, putting in two to three hours of counting before vans took them to six deployment centers to become escorts for the civilian counters, who began arriving shortly before 5 a.m. and would be doing most of their inspections from their cars.

The veterans knew where to look because all had been there.

Vietnam vet Tim Bracey said he still dreams of the drug he grew to like during the war and quit using only after stints on the street and in prison.

Malone declined a light reflective vest for a planned trip through the Bluff, because he'd lived there for years, sharing an abandoned house with some rats.

"They know me," he said of the neighborhood's homeless. "Just don't give me no vest."

The veterans were getting paid for their work as part of a VA program designed to help reintroduce them to the working life. But many said they would have done it without pay.

Alex Westbrook was one of them. A Cleveland transplant who spent 1999 living in a car and bouncing between missions, Westbrook wanted to do the count, he said, "to remind myself, kind of keep my eyes open" to what could happen if he slips again.

Michael Scott, a pedicurist nicknamed Dr. Foot, came to Atlanta from Detroit via Nashville. He said he ended up on the streets courtesy of high-proof wine, left it thanks to God, and was on the count to pay the world back.

Tuesday morning, he teamed up with Gulf War vet Freddie Diggs, knocking off an area stretching several square blocks from the upscale Peachtree Street hotels to the Five Points MARTA station area.

Critics 'appalled'

The Scott-Diggs team's count started slowly, in part because some of the haunts they knew had been cleaned out by police in Mayor Shirley Franklin's administration, they said. Then they spotted five men sprawled on the lobby floor of a closed check cashing business, four more stretched across a sidewalk grate in the hotel district under some cardboard and a San Francisco travel poster, and 12 more wandering in the distance on Auburn Avenue -- although they weren't entirely sure those 12 weren't coming out of a club.

By the time the van picked them up again, the pair had marked 83 homeless in their clipboard.

Like homeless counts everywhere, this one had its critics.

Homeless advocate Alan Harris said he wanted to see some statistical extrapolation added to the head count.

"Appalled," was the response of Anita Beaty, of the Metro Atlanta Homeless Task Force.

Beaty said snapshot counts don't accurately reflect a city's homeless count. She said her staff had attended training for the count and reported that volunteers were encouraged to stay out of the dangerous areas where the homeless were most likely to be. She also said too much of the census -- in areas outside of homeless hot spots -- was done from cars.

Pathways' Matson said organizers are aware they missed people and plan to the augment the count with data from area service providers to approximate the kind and number of people missed.

For most of the veterans, the morning ended in the car of one of the volunteers, touring outlying areas.

But not for Malone, Diggs, Bracey and Jarvis Steward, another homeless veteran of the Gulf War.

That was the group assigned to walk the Beltline, the railway line that crosses Ponce de Leon Avenue next to City Hall East.

They got there off Monroe, behind the Blockbuster at the corner of Virginia Avenue.

The path was sometimes muddy and sometimes tricky: The trestle over Ponce was so full of holes that the only safe place for feet was on the rails. Despite that, the path was well worn.

With Malone in the lead, the group passed makeshift tents, a double or triple occupancy cardboard box home, the camp with the view, another camp and mounds of blankets, which they were uncannily able to translate into a human body count.

Then they climbed down from the trestle to North Avenue on a pile of rocks and logs, caught their ride and returned to the VA hospital, briskly arguing with each other about the war on drugs, the finer points of 12-step programs, homelessness and the University of Georgia basketball recruiting scandal.

Then they called it a day and headed to work.